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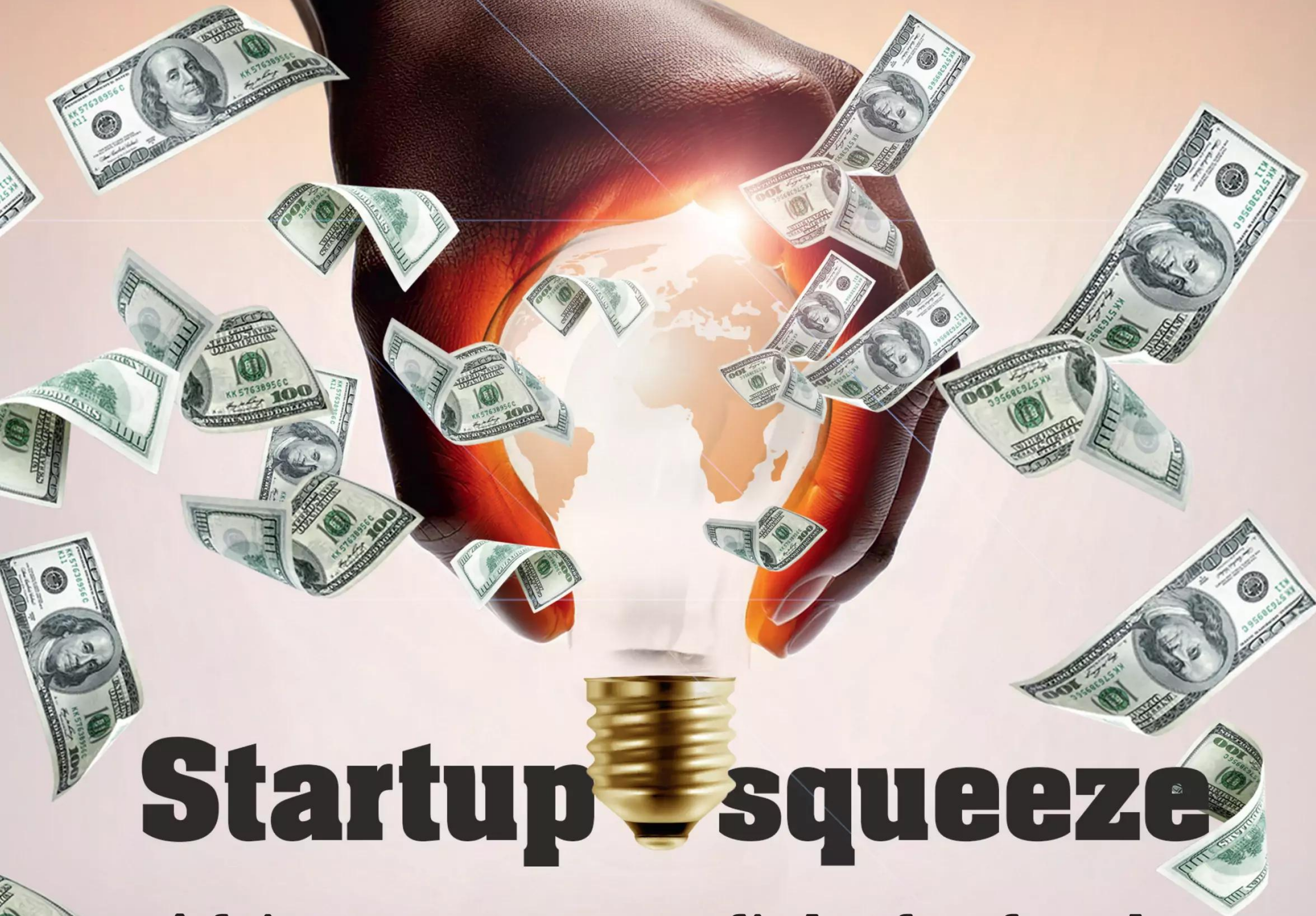
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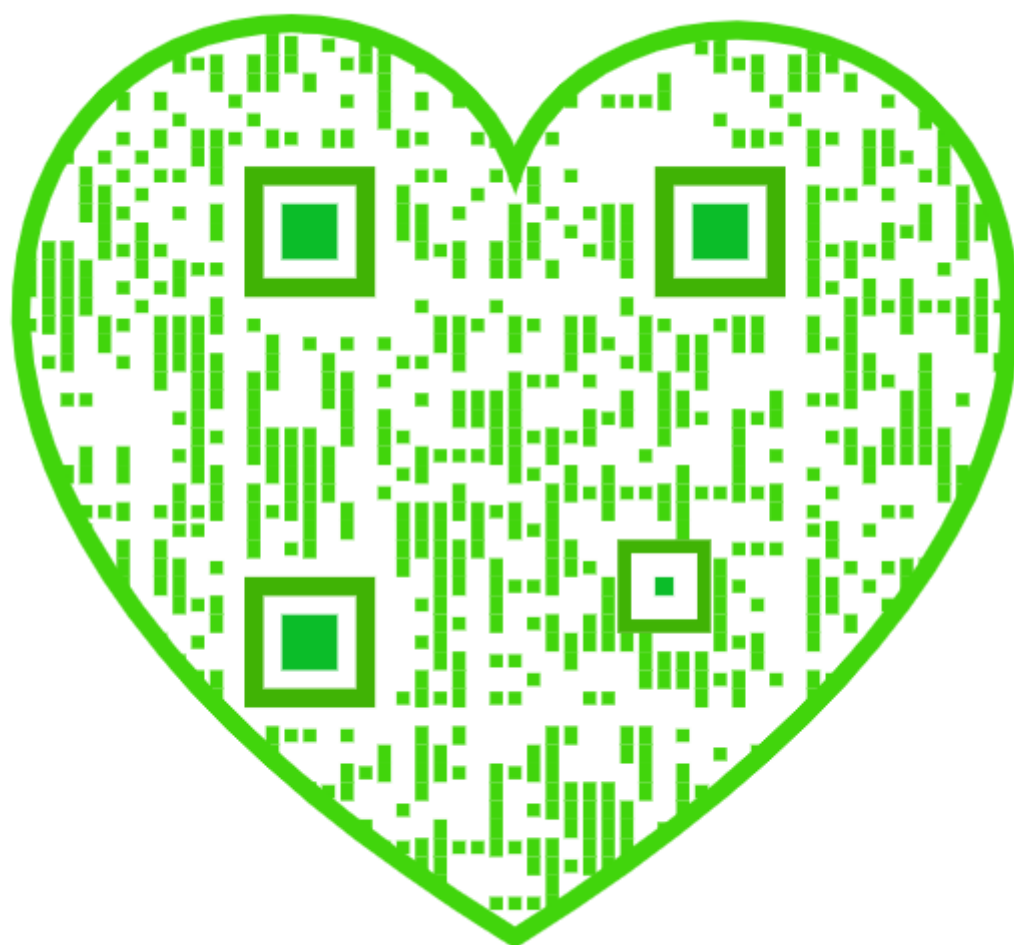
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Business Intelligence News

The IMF says developing and emerging markets will be hit by “trade tensions and extremely high levels of policy uncertainty.” **Toni Kan** reports.

The IMF has projected that global growth will drop to 2.8% in 2025 and 3% in 2026 due to the announcement of “a series of new tariff measures by the United States and countermeasures by its trading partners”, in a downbeat *World Economic Outlook (WEO)*.

“Following an unprecedented series of shocks in the preceding years, global growth was stable yet underwhelming through 2024 and was projected to remain so in the January 2025 *WEO* update.

“However, the landscape has changed as governments around the world reorder policy priorities.” Announce-

ments since the release of the January 2025 *WEO* update are ending up in “near-universal US tariffs on 2 April and bringing effective tariff rates to levels not seen in a century...”

“The swift escalation of trade tensions and extremely high levels of policy uncertainty are expected to have a significant impact on global economic activity,” the Fund said. The projections represent a downward shift from the 3.3% growth projected for both years in the January 2025 *WEO*.

Unpredictability

The Fund said that tariffs on their own would represent a “major negative shock to growth”, and added that “the unpredictability with which these measures have been unfolding also has a negative impact on economic

activity and the outlook and, at the same time, makes it more difficult than usual to make assumptions.”

This report presents a “reference forecast” based on information available as of 4 April, “in lieu of the usual baseline.”

Growth to slow across globe

Emerging markets and developing economies will see growth slowing to 3.7% in 2025 and 3.9% in 2026, with significant downgrades expected for countries affected most by recent trade measures, such as China.

Growth of 1.4% is projected for advanced economies in 2025 and 1.8% for the United States, 0.9% lower than the US projection in the *WEO* update of January 2025. The euro area will see growth slow by 0.2% to 0.8%.

Global headline inflation “is expected to decline at a pace that is slightly slower than what was expected in January, reaching 4.3% in 2025 and 3.6% in 2026.”

The IMF advised that to counter the slow pace of growth countries should work “constructively to promote a stable and predictable trade environment, facilitate

debt restructuring, and address shared challenges.”

It also advised that there should be a focus on addressing “domestic policy and structural imbalances” in order to ensure “internal economic stability”.

African momentum interrupted

Hervé Ndoba, the Central African Republic’s minister of finance and budget and chair of the African caucus of finance ministers and central bank governors, and Kristalina Georgieva, managing director of the IMF, issued a joint statement at the conclusion of the IMF’s African Consultative Group meeting.

“While growth in Africa is showing some resilience in the face of multiple shocks, the sudden shift in the global outlook has interrupted the growth momentum...”

“The strong policy actions that have been taken to bring down inflation, stabilise public debt, and reduce external imbalances risk being undone in the face of further shocks. Risks to the outlook are high [with] fragile and conflict-affected states facing particularly acute challenges.”

Global growth to slow as a result of Trump’s tariffs, says IMF



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Business Intelligence Deals

China Southern Airlines (CSA) has signed a memorandum of understanding with Royal Air Maroc (RAM), Morocco's national airline, to boost collaboration and build a new "aviation corridor" between China and Africa. According to the MoU, CSA and RAM will establish a code-sharing partnership, improving customer connectivity to Africa through RAM and China and Asia through CSA. The airlines will also cooperate in passenger and cargo transportation resources and third-party businesses. Qu Guangji, executive vice-president of CSA, said the deal will help to boost China's Belt & Road initiative.

EDF to take 37.5% of Madagascar's Volobe Amont hydro project

French energy giant EDF has joined the consortium to develop the Volobe Amont hydroelectric power project in Madagascar. Under the new shareholder structure, EDF Renouvelables will take 37.5% alongside AXIAN Energy (via NEA Volobe) with 37.5% and Africa50 with 25%. The government of Madagascar is expected to acquire a 20% equity stake in the consortium at financial close. The consortium says it is actively working towards financial close, supported by the International Finance Corporation (IFC), a member of the World Bank Group. The call for tenders has been scheduled following the completion of geological and hydrological assessments.

AXIAN Telecom gets \$100m from EIB for mobile broadband

The European Investment Bank (EIB) has announced a financing package of \$100m to AXIAN Telecom to support the expansion of its mobile broadband network infrastructure across Madagascar and Tanzania. \$60m of the financing will benefit Tanzania and \$40m will go to Madagascar. The project will expand 4G mobile broadband network infrastructure across the two countries as well as continuing the introduction of 5G coverage. The new investment, under the EU's Global Gateway framework, is backed by a European Commission budgetary guarantee. AXIAN Telecom serves over 44m subscribers in nine Sub-Saharan African countries.

South Africa teams up with China National Nuclear Corporation

South Africa's Nuclear Energy Corporation signed a memorandum of understanding with the China National Nuclear Corporation (CNNC) during an official visit to China led by South Africa's electricity and energy minister, Kgosientsho Ramokgopa. The agreement aims to revive South Africa's nuclear fuel cycle, accelerate the deployment of small modular reactors and promote collaboration on advanced fuels such as high-assay low-enriched uranium. China also has nuclear co-operation agreements in place with Ghana, Kenya and Nigeria. The IAEA forecasts a 58% increase in nuclear energy adoption across Africa by 2030, with a tenfold expansion by 2050.

Royal Air Maroc and China Southern Airlines plan 'aviation corridor'



Business Intelligence News

African producers hope for boost from gold surge

*The price of gold has hit record highs as global investors rotate out of the US dollar and into the “safe haven” commodity, raising hopes that Africa’s gold-exporters could see a boost to their economies, reports **Harry Clynh.***

In late April gold was trading at a historic high of around \$3,350 per troy ounce and has strengthened by more than 25% since the start of the year. The price of gold appeared to be benefiting from reduced confidence in the US dollar as a result of President Trump imposing sweeping near-universal tariffs.

The ICE US Dollar Index, the leading benchmark for measuring the international value of the dollar, is down over 8% since January.

While the greenback and dollar-denominated assets such as Treasury bills tend to be perceived as extremely safe investments, political and economic risks in the US have caused some investors to reconsider – and opt

instead for gold.

Oliver Blagden, a gold and base metals analyst at CRU Group in London, tells *African Business* that “confidence in the US dollar is definitely a major contributor driving gold prices.”

“Recent events and policies from the White House have triggered chaos in global markets. Uncertainty and risk in stocks and bonds is up, and sentiment is down, which has caused significant investment in gold,” he says.

“The events of recent weeks have reminded us that the traditional attitude of putting money into gold during times of uncertainty is still strong – gold is viewed as a safe, stable asset globally,” Blagden adds.

Welcome for miners

Stronger gold prices are welcome news for Africa’s major gold exporters such as Ghana, South Africa, Mali, and Burkina Faso. In 2023 the continent accounted for around

25% of global gold output, producing approximately 840 metric tonnes of the precious metal.

Gold exports play a particularly vital role in West African economies. In 2024, gold production contributed more than 12% to Ghana’s GDP and gold exports accounted for almost 60% of the country’s total export revenue.

A period of higher gold prices could therefore allow gold exporters to benefit from higher foreign exchange earnings. This could boost central banks’ foreign reserves and stabilise domestic currencies. Higher government revenue from taxes paid by gold producers and mining companies could also ease fiscal pressures

and support public investment. Blagden suggests the long-term outlook for gold is “looking very bullish”. Central banks are replacing the greenback with gold: they have collectively bought over 1,000 tonnes of gold annually since 2022 and are set to do the same this year.

“De-dollarisation has become more prominent in recent years, as BRICS countries look to become less reliant on the US dollar and economy,” Blagden tells *African Business*.

“The past few weeks have been a wake-up call for the entire world as countries look towards “independence” from the US – whether that is currency or trade related,” he says. “This is a huge upside for gold.”

Most analysts expect the price of gold to continue rising. Goldman Sachs sees it hitting \$3,700 per ounce by the end of 2025 – and notes that in extreme scenarios it could hit \$4,500. Morgan Stanley has predicted \$3,400 by year-end, with UBS suggesting it will be around \$3,500.

Blagden says that “it is difficult to tell what the next move from the Oval Office will be, which creates more uncertainty.”

Harmony Gold Mining Company’s Moab Khotsoeng mine near Orkney, South Africa.



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Business Intelligence News

*The exercises are inspired by India's desire to engage with Africa on security and advance its broader diplomatic and economic goals, reports **Harry Clynch**.*

India's largest-ever joint naval exercises in Africa took place in mid April in the western Indian Ocean, as New Delhi seeks to build stronger ties with the continent.

The six-day exercises were co-hosted by Tanzania and include eight other countries which have coastlines on the Indian Ocean, including Kenya, Madagascar, Mauritius, and South Africa. They focused on counter-piracy operations as India seeks to position itself as the security partner of choice in the region.

Harsh Pant, director of the strategic studies programme at the Observer Research Foundation in New Delhi, tells *African Business* that the exercises are partly inspired by India's desire to engage with Africa on regional security issues

– but also to advance its broader diplomatic and economic goals on the continent.

“Working with Africa on regional priorities and managing some of the regional challenges in the maritime space is becoming more vital for India,” Pant says. “But I think it also conforms with India's wider foreign policy goals, which have focused on the Global South.”

New Delhi positions itself as key partner

India has long sought to leverage its relationships in Africa in order to further a broad range of geopolitical and economic interests. India and African countries are united in their desire to reform global governance structures, for example, with India having helped to secure permanent membership for the African Union in the G20 during its presidency of the group in 2023.

Trading relationships are also steadily growing: India

is now Africa's third largest trading partner after China and the European Union, with bilateral trade reaching \$93bn in 2022 – more than a nine-fold increase since the turn of the century.

At a time when Africa is keen not to be caught in the crossfire of an escalating US-China trade war, Pant says that India is positioning itself as a lucrative potential partner that is relatively immune from these tensions.

“African nations are wary of being trapped in the middle of the contest between the US and China,” he says. “India, which pursues policies independent of both countries, offers African countries a way to manage this greater structural change. Military exercises of this kind help to burnish India's credentials as a viable partner.”

Africa seeks alternative trading partners

These engagements also come at a time when many African countries are

looking for alternative trading partners after being hit with tariffs from the US. South Africa – which has already had several rows with the new Trump administration, including one that saw its ambassador to Washington DC expelled – is just one African country looking to diversify away from the US in light of its trade policy.

South Africa's Deputy President Paul Mashatile said in April that the country would seek to intensify its trading relationships with India and others in a bid to counter the impact of US tariffs.

“There is this sense that the US, particularly under Trump, is not interested in Africa,” Pant tells *African Business*. “China has, of course, been interested in Africa and has a major stake in the continent, but is now bound up with its contest with the US. India does not have that problem and can bring partnerships to bear in the region to the benefit of itself and Africa.”

India's largest naval exercises with Africa flaunt expanded influence



Apostolic succession

*The late Pope was hailed for his compassion, peacemaking, and strengthening the voice of African congregations within the Church, writes **Emily Allen**.*

Africa mourns Pope Francis with an eye on Church's future

The death of Pope Francis at the age of 88 on Easter Monday prompted fulsome tributes from African leaders, who hailed his twelve years at the helm of the global Catholic Church. Nigeria's President Bola Tinubu called Pope Francis a "tireless champion of the poor" and South African president Cyril Ramaphosa highlighted his "world view of inclusion [and] equality".

Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi extended his condolences to the Vatican, stating that the late Pope "leaves behind an extraordinary legacy of compassion and humanity that will forever remain etched in the conscience of mankind". King Mohammed VI of Morocco paid tribute to Pope Francis's "dedication to combating marginalisation and poverty and defending human dignity".

From Rome to Rio De Janeiro, the Pope's loss is felt keenly by Catholics around the world – and particularly in the African countries that are home to an estimated 272m Catholics.

According to the Vatican, over the past year alone 7m Africans have converted to Catholicism, making



the continent home to one of the fastest-growing Catholic populations in the world.

Nigeria and Kenya have among the highest weekly Catholic church attendance rates globally, while the Democratic Republic of Congo, Cameroon, Uganda and Angola also have strong Catholic communities.

Francis' 12 years in office were marked by highs and lows as he continued to pursue social justice and modernise the Catholic mission, while struggling with the fallout the church suffered in the wake of scandals. Seen by some as a trailblazer, upon his election as Bishop of Rome in 2013 he became the first Latin American pope, the first pope from the Southern Hemisphere, and the first pope from outside Europe since the 8th-century Syrian Gregory III.

Strengthening Africa within the Church

The continent has, for many years, been an important bastion of faith for the Catholic church and the importance of its momentum was recognised by Pope Francis, who significantly increased African representation within the College of cardinals during his papacy in a gesture of trust in the continent's leadership potential. He travelled to the African continent five times during his pontificate and visited 10 African countries in all; his journeys were defined by messages of peace, social and environmental justice and interfaith dialogue.

Pope Francis's first visit to the continent was in November 2015 when he visited Kenya, Uganda, and the Central African Republic. He celebrated mass at the University of Nairobi; he honoured the Ugandan Martyrs, executed in the 1880s for refusing to renounce Christianity, at the Namugongo shrine and, in a historic move, he visited the Central African Republic despite civil unrest, declaring himself a "pilgrim of peace" and sharing his hope of unity and an end to conflict.

Pope Francis's first visit to North Africa, and his first to a country with a Muslim majority, came in 2017 when he went to Egypt with the aim of strengthening interfaith relations. He visited Al-Azhar University and met with Grand Imam Ahmed el-Tayeb, and also expressed solidarity with Egypt's Coptic Christians following attacks on their community earlier that year.

Accepting an invitation from King Mohammed VI in 2019, Pope Francis visited Morocco, where he furthered his message of religious tolerance and the rights of migrants. During an address at the Hassan Tower in Rabat he called for cross-cultural cohesion, declaring that "courage to encounter one another and extend a hand of friendship is a pathway of peace and harmony for humanity... whereas extremism and hatred cause division and destruction."

Later in the same year the Pope visited Mozambique, Madagascar, and Mauritius, advocating for peace and reconciliation following the years of conflict that Mozambique had faced.

He also called for protection of island nations' natural resources and biodiversity. He quoted his papal namesake, Saint Francis of Assisi, in declaring

that "Madagascar is famous for its natural beauty and for this, we say Laudato Si." Taken from St Francis's Canticle of the Creatures, that Latin phrase describes "our duty to look after it with care".

Peacemaker

Pope Francis's last visit to the continent was also one of the most important politically. In 2023 he visited South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo on a dedicated peace mission that included the then Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby. Four years previously, in what was one of the most symbolic moments of his papacy, Pope Francis had knelt on the floor of the Vatican and kissed the feet of South Sudan's rival leaders. In Juba he made an ecumenical pilgrimage to promote peace in the region.

The Pope's visits to the continent were emblematic of his deep-rooted commitment to addressing current global issues through compassion and dialogue. One of his most impactful and famous speeches, given in Kinshasa in 2023, contained the memorable line "Hands off the Democratic Republic of the Congo! Hands off Africa! Stop choking Africa; Africa is not a mine to be stripped or a terrain to be plundered!" Pope Francis's relationship with Africa was grounded in mutual respect; he saw African Catholics not as recipients of charity, but as co-creators of the church's future.

Eyes on successor

As the world mourns, attention is now turned to the Pope's successor. It has been over 1,500 years since the Catholic church has been headed by a pope from the African continent. In the papacy's history, three of its 266 popes have come from Africa: Pope Victor I, who some estimate to have been in post from 189 to 199 AD; Pope Miltiades (311 to 314 AD); and Pope Gelasius I (492 to 496 AD). All came from Africa Proconsularis, a historic Roman province which encompassed much of modern-day Tunisia.

There are 18 cardinals from the African continent eligible to be elected pope at the upcoming conclave. They include Ghanaian cardinal Peter Turkson, who was a key

advisor to Pope Francis; Guinean cardinal Robert Sarah, who served as prefect of the conservative Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments from 2014 until 2021; and cardinal Dieudonné Nzapalainga from the Central African Republic who, at 57, is one of the youngest cardinals.

Speaking to the BBC in late April, Father Stan Chu Ilo, president of the Pan-African Catholic Theological Network, said that "an African pope is not a question of 'if' but 'when'... the Catholic Church in Africa is now a theological, spiritual, and demographic powerhouse." Archbishop of Abuja Ignatius Kaigama stated: "We are not praying for an African pope... we are praying for a good and holy pope."

When the black smoke rising from the conclave of cardinals' quarters famously turns to white, it is clear that whatever lies ahead for the Catholic church, Africa is no longer on its periphery. ■



It has been over 1,500 years since the Catholic church has been headed by a pope from the African continent. In the papacy's history, three of its 266 popes have come from Africa

Above: Ghanaian cardinal Peter Turkson.

Opposite: Pope Francis (C) waved as he arrived by popemobile to meet young people and catechists at Martyrs' Stadium in Kinshasa.

*At a major tech gathering in Morocco, **Lennox Yieke** finds that startup funders are tightening their belts and looking at debt funding.*

The big funding squeeze:

Can startups survive?

Startup businesses from across Africa convened in Marrakech in April for GITEX Africa, one of the tech industry's biggest gatherings on the continent. In the cavernous exhibition spaces of the city's exhibition centre firms demonstrated their technology, learned from like-minded peers and attempted to persuade funders to get out their chequebooks. This was the third year of the continent's spin-off event from the Gulf Information Technology Exhibition held in Dubai.

Following US President Donald Trump's global trade war and reduced expectations of global economic growth, the mood at this year's gathering was somewhat muted, and the data shows why.

African startups attracted an estimated \$2.8bn in new investments across 750 reported deals in 2024. This marks a sharp deceleration from 2023, when startups raised \$3.9bn across 930 disclosed transactions, according to a report by Briter, a market intelligence and research firm focused on emerging markets. The value of deals fell by 28% year-on-year while the total number of transactions decreased by 19%, the report reveals.

Given the tight funding environment, startups have to do ever more to stand out from the crowd, offer attractive investment terms and prove their worth to investors in double-quick time. The days of hoovering up speculative capital based on the promises of future windfalls appear to be drawing to a close.

Raising capital by offering equity stakes to investors has become an increasingly uphill task for founders and their management teams, compelling many startups on the continent to explore other strategies of funding their growth ambitions.

Turning to debt

One sign of investors feeling less inclined to provide risk capital to startups is the increasing popularity of debt funding, a major topic of conversation among the firms seeking capital at GITEX.

Previously reluctant to take on debt, startups looking out on a constrained funding environment are now opening their minds to the asset class and taking the plunge.

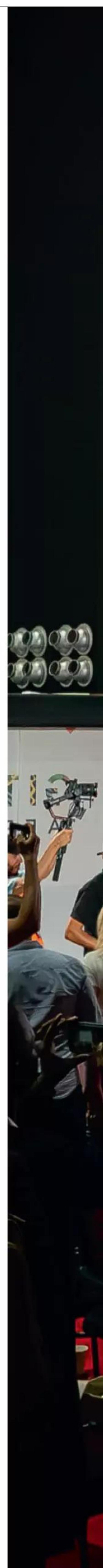
According to a new report by the African Private Capital Association (AVCA), the value of venture debt utilised in tech deals edged higher by 3% year-on-year to account for 37% of total venture capital (VC) deal value in 2024. Venture debt deals representing just 12% of all transactions, highlighting the outsized role that debt is playing in supporting Africa's tech ecosystem.

"There is a growing demand for debt as an asset class," says Dario Giuliani, managing director of Briter, on the sidelines of GITEX.

It is not just venture debt lenders who are helping startups bridge the funding gap; commercial banks, too, are playing an ever more crucial role.

"We're seeing a growing number of startups rais-

Opposite:
winners of the
Gitex Supernova
Challenge Pitch.





Cover Story: African ventures fight for funds

ing debt for things like asset finance,” he tells *African Business*. “This points to the growing role of traditional lenders such as commercial banks.”

However, early-stage companies that are yet to attain meaningful revenues or build an operational track record have found themselves at a distinct disadvantage. This is because lenders typically steer clear of unproven business ventures with limited assets and earnings.

The upside to this is that many startups have intensified efforts to tighten internal controls and formalise their businesses in order to qualify for much-needed credit facilities.

Blended finance is another opportunity that early-stage startups can tap into, says Giuliani, with grants offered alongside equity and debt financing becoming more mainstream in recent years.

However, he admits that recent moves by major donor nations to slash development aid has dampened spirits.

“Sentiment has certainly taken a hit, though we’re still waiting to see how this will play out in terms of the volume of grant funding available to startups,” he says.

Don’t try to replicate Silicon Valley

Joojo Ocran, the strategic partnerships director for Africa at Startupbootcamp AfriTech – a multi-corporate-backed accelerator programme – sees a silver lining in the current downturn in VC funding. He tells *African Business* that the funding squeeze provides an opportunity for large corporations on the continent to step in and play a more prominent role in Africa’s tech ecosystem.

Africa, he argues, is overly focused on trying to replicate the Silicon Valley VC model, in which vibrant capital markets have created a strong incentive for VC funds to close as many deals as possible, in the shortest timeline conceivable – often at stretched valuations.

“The Silicon Valley VC model may be inspiring, but the reality is that it is not well suited to the African context. Our capital markets are far less mature than those in the US, which means that startups here must seek alternatives to traditional venture capital funding if they want to innovate at scale,” Ocran explains.

Startupbootcamp AfriTech champions a model in which, instead of startups relying too much on investments from traditional VCs, they partner with select corporates in the programme to achieve scale in a sustainable fashion.

Some of the programme’s corporate partners include Telecel, Google, BNP Paribas and RCS Group, a major payments company in South Africa.

“We’re focused on creating an ecosystem where startups and corporate partners can build symbiotic relationships,” Ocran says.

“Corporations benefit from access to innovation, commercial solutions, and even opportunities to expand their M&A [merger and acquisition] pipelines,” he adds.

Ocran argues that this model has led to more of its investee companies growing healthily over the long-term compared with traditional VC models, where he says failure rates are much higher.

Startupbootcamp AfriTech has, Ocran tells *African*





Business, helped more than 60 startups raise over \$145m in funding; this “portfolio” of companies is, he says, currently worth slightly north of \$850m.

He stresses that it all comes down to finding the right fit between a startup and corporates. The two need to be in complementary markets, and there is a great deal of vetting that takes place before a startup is matched with a corporate sponsor, he says.

“We identify startups that fit the mandates of our partners, and help them to de-risk and refine their value proposition. The goal is to help them create compelling proof of concept projects that provide tangible ROI [return on investment] to partners and help the startups drive sustainable growth,” he says.

“African startups must prioritise profitable, sustainable growth. That’s the message we emphasise.”

Investing when others are afraid

For Uwemakpan Uwemedimo, head of investments of Fund II at Launch Africa Ventures – a pan-African early-stage investment firm established in 2020 – the prevailing pessimism that has engulfed the African tech scene presents an opportunity to capitalise on discounted valuations.

“Warren Buffett usually says to invest when everyone is afraid of investing,” he recalls, arguing that there is a critical need for pan-African funds such as Launch Africa Ventures to continue backing promising founders who are making a significant difference to the ecosystem.

He says the fund is willing to go into areas others are not. “We come in at the riskiest stage when others are not willing to invest,” he tells *African Business*.

The firm, which he says raised \$33m for its first fund and invested in 133 companies, is currently in the midst of a capital raise targeting \$75m for Fund II. “We’ve already started deploying proceeds from our Fund II raise across 20 companies,” Uwemedimo says.

Lina Kacyem, investment manager at the firm, tells *African Business* that the timing is right for capital raising. Valuations, she stresses, have come back down to earth, presenting an opportunity to snap up companies with promising upside potential.

“What we’re seeing right now, compared with during Covid, is more of a readjustment in terms of valuation. They are closer to where things should be,” she says.

With a portfolio spanning 150 startups across 22 countries between the two funds, the firm plans to deepen its focus rather than expand geographically. “We’ll leverage lessons from Fund I, zoning in on high-potential economies while maintaining our first-mover culture,” Kacyem says.

“For example, when we talk about francophone Africa, most pan-African VC funds were not even present in francophone countries two years ago, while we have been making investments in those geographies for four to five years,” she says.

“Now people are understanding, because of the stability of the currency, because of how those economies are integrated, that those are interesting markets when you look at them as a bloc,” she adds.

For Fund II, Uwemedimo says the firm will back fewer companies than in Fund I, despite planning to raise more than double the capital. “We want to write bigger cheques and prioritise follow-on investments,”

Cover Story: African ventures fight for funds

he says. “When our founders grow rapidly, we want to ensure we have the firepower to back them again, so they can focus on building rather than fundraising.”

The key sectors for Fund II will include healthcare, fintech, cybersecurity, agri-tech, electric mobility, and AI applications for African languages. “Our startups must serve consumers across borders, and AI for local languages is a priority,” Kacyem says.

Offering advice to founders keen on scaling up successfully, Kacyem stresses the importance of targeting the right investors.

“Do your homework,” she urges. “Understand investors’ priorities, study their portfolios, and talk to other founders who have received money from them about their experiences. Not everyone with a cheque is the right fit.”

Policymakers’ crucial role

While it is primarily startups and private sector investors that must challenge the status quo and take the risks needed to transform African tech, policymakers play an equally crucial role: they help establish a robust legal and regulatory framework that promotes innovation at scale and attracts long-term investments that lead to the creation of quality jobs.

Talkmore Chidede, a senior digital trade expert in the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) secretariat, emphasises the importance of leveraging the AfCFTA to expand the reach of African tech startups and help them achieve a level of scale that domestic markets alone may not provide.

“Tech players in Africa’s private sector looking to expand their continental presence must familiarise themselves with the opportunities presented by the protocol on digital trade,” Chidede tells *African Business* on the sidelines of GITEX. “The protocol on digital trade is a legal framework that harmonises digital trade rules across all member states of the African Union.”

He notes that the protocol’s general framework, alongside its eight annexes, covers critical areas such as digital identities, interoperability of digital financial systems, and cross-border data transfers.

“In some African nations it is still impossible to transfer data across borders. Restrictions on cross-border data transfers need to be removed, but this must be executed through secure means that guarantee privacy and protection of personal data,” he stresses.

“The protocol on digital trade has provisions to support this process, fostering innovation while protecting Africa’s data.”

Although supporting the growth and success of local entrepreneurs is essential for Africa’s digital future, attracting investments from global tech giants is just as important. These firms can help African nations to develop much of the infrastructure that underpins modern digital economies, including building more data centres, improving connectivity,

and closing the power access gap for individuals and businesses. To secure these investments from global tech titans, countries across the continent are engaging in novel forms of digital diplomacy.

“In recent years, technology has gained prominence in international diplomacy,” Philip Thigo, Kenya’s special envoy on technology, tells *African Business*.

“A dedicated envoy is crucial in bridging the gap between industry and government, ensuring effective negotiation on science, technology, and innovation in a world where geopolitics has gotten more complex.”

The dream hasn’t died

Still, despite the gaps in policymaking and the reduced appetites of investors, it’s not all doom and gloom. GITEX still offered a platform for vibrant, original startups offering solutions to Africa’s chal-

lenges, from fintech to health and agritech. Young, entrepreneurial founders refuse to be downcast by the funding environment which many see as but a passing phase.

Indeed, Briter’s Giuliani argues that early-stage startups need not panic about constrained access to financing or the slowdown in overall VC flows to Africa.

On the contrary, he says that the data shows that there is a steadily growing appetite from VCs and other investors for smaller deals involving younger, promising companies.

He contends that the widely reported headline figures on the funding landscape inadvertently mask this important nuance, attributing this to the disproportionate influence of mega-deals on aggregate transaction values.

“The ten largest deals every year for the past decade have consistently accounted for more than half of all funding raised, while representing only a tiny percentage of the number of total transactions reported,” he says.

“Most of the deal activity is around smaller deals, and we continue to witness a steady increase in the number of early-stage transactions in Africa, with ticket sizes ranging from \$500,000 to \$1m representing a larger proportion of all deals closed,” he says.

Abi Mustapha-Maduakor, CEO of AVCA, stresses that Africa had demonstrated “notable resilience”.

“While overall funding has contracted, we’re seeing strategic adaptations – higher quality deals, sector diversification beyond fintech, increased venture debt utilisation, and the strengthening role of African investors,” she says.

While acknowledging the gravity of the challenges faced by startups grappling with constrained access to capital, Giuliani argues that some of the pessimism surrounding the current funding environment has been overdone.

“If you zoom out and look at the bigger picture, we’re actually on a pretty solid trajectory over the past decade – the challenges of the past few years notwithstanding,” Giuliani says. ■



‘Do your homework. Understand investors’ priorities, study their portfolios, and talk to other founders... Not everyone with a cheque is the right fit’

Above: Lina Kacyem, investment manager, Fund II, at Launch Africa Ventures.





Policymakers and technologists gathered in Rwanda in April to discuss how the continent can harness AI and keep up with global trends, reports Harry Clynh.

Africa forges own AI path at Kigali summit

At the start of April the Global AI Summit on Africa took place in Kigali, Rwanda. The event was hosted by Rwanda's Centre for the Fourth Industrial Revolution (C4IR) and the ministry of information and communications technology (ICT) and innovation, in collaboration with the World Economic Forum. After the global Artificial Intelligence Action Summit, held in Paris in February, this Africa-specific event was billed as an opportunity for the continent to start hammering out its own approach to critical policy issues.

Bringing together heads of government, business leaders, investors, and international organisations from across the continent, the summit sought to make tangible progress on "shaping Africa's role in the global AI economy".

The event was also seen as a sign that African governments and organisations are determined to forge a path forward for the continent that manages the risks associated with this new technology – while also seizing its potentially transformative potential across strategic sectors such as health, agriculture, and finance.

Bilal Mateen, chief AI officer at London-based healthcare firm PATH and summit attendee, tells *African Business* that "no individual event is going to solve all the problems, but we require these kinds of convenings to keep up the momentum and energy."

Symbolically important

Mateen adds that the symbolism of an Africa-specific summit was critical, especially given the conversation around AI has often been dominated by the established economic powers.

"Seeing the baton pass over to the African continent, seeing a bunch of continental leaders talk about the opportunity and how to get there, was very important," Mateen says. "There are only so many summits that we can have among the G7 countries before you ask: what about the rest of the world?"

While the summit was symbolically important for this reason, there was also a flurry of announcements before, during, and after the Global AI Summit on Africa – raising hopes that the continent is starting to move beyond discussion and towards practical action when it comes to harnessing AI.

Indeed, shortly prior to the event, Zimbabwean telecoms tycoon Strive Masiyiwa announced that the company which he founded, Cassava Technologies, had partnered with US tech giant NVIDIA to build Africa's "first AI factory".

Cassava said it would deploy NVIDIA's accelerated computing and AI software at its data centres in South Africa by June of this year, before expanding this to other data centres in Egypt, Kenya, Morocco, and Nigeria.

The move is significant as Africa's AI efforts have so far been hampered by a lack of affordable and effective



computing resources. AI systems tend to be extremely power-hungry and therefore expensive – raising questions as to whether many African countries have the infrastructural or economic capacity to invest in AI technology.

Infrastructure gaps still apparent

Menzi Ndhlovu, a senior political and economic analyst at the Signal Risk consultancy in Cape Town, asks: “does Africa have the capacity to focus on AI, given the fact we are still dealing with basic things such as having sufficient telephone infrastructure and electric infrastructure?”

“Before we can start talking about AI and all these grand technical plans, we need to deal with developmental and basic infrastructure problems.”

Darlington Akogo, founder and CEO at minoHealth AI Labs in Accra, who also travelled to Kigali for the summit, notes that “the computing issue was identified as the biggest challenge for Africa.”

He was encouraged, however, that the partnership announced between Cassava and NVIDIA demonstrates how “solutions to this problem have started to materialise.” Mateen also says that the move shows “we are finally making real, tangible progress towards addressing the computing capacity on the continent.”

Investment unveiled

There were further announcements of investment aimed at overcoming Africa’s infrastructure challenges. Rwanda’s minister of ICT and innovation, Paula Ingabire, signed a memorandum of understanding with Trevel Mundel, president of global health at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, to establish the “Rwanda Artificial Intelligence Scaling Hub”.

Backed with \$7.5m over three years from the Gates Foundation, the AI Scaling Hub is intended to serve as a regional centre for AI innovation, tasked with finding innovative ways to scale Africa-specific AI solutions in critical sectors such as healthcare, agriculture, and education.

When announcing the MoU in Kigali, Mundel emphasised that the partnership is intended to overcome the barriers that exist to AI adoption in Africa and help the technology reach the communities which need it the most – something which could then serve as a model for other governments and international organisations.

The Mastercard Foundation also announced its support for inclusive digital tools such as Deafcantalk, an AI-powered smartphone app enabling those with hearing disabilities to communicate in real time, with the similar aim of showing how AI can be scaled in Africa for social and economic good.

Akogo says the summit was a success in terms of attracting “investment from the developmental funds” but suggests that more work is required if Africa wishes to attract capital from global venture capital funds.

He notes that he “met a few VCs at the conference

and they were very much actively looking for things to invest in,” but believes that they are sometimes deterred by the high cost of running AI initiatives in Africa as this further complicates start-ups’ route to profitability. “African deals tend to be on the much lower end of ticket sizes, which suggests we are not making ourselves globally competitive,” Akogo tells *African Business*.

The Global AI Summit on Africa also made progress on addressing the disparities in existing AI technology. AI tools are “trained” to make decisions based on datasets, but information sources from African countries and individuals currently make up a tiny proportion of the data being used in these systems.

This means that AI tools are often limited in their ability to process local African languages, for example; or they can offer outputs that are prejudicial or harmful in an African context.

Chenayi Mutambasere, development economist at the Africa Centre for Economic Justice, tells *African Business* that she was pleased to see Google’s managing director for Africa, Alex Okosi, “highlight their commitment to advancing the African AI revolution by building robust datasets in African languages”.

“This is a critical step towards ensuring that AI technologies are inclusive, contextually relevant, and accessible to communities across the continent,” she adds. However, Mutambasere believes that further action is required on the part of regulators.

“There is an urgent need to establish a comprehensive framework for data governance in Africa – data should be recognised not just as a technical input, but as a vital economic asset,” Mutambasere says. “As the continent accelerates its AI ambitions, there is a real risk that, without proper stewardship, the intrinsic value of African data could be overlooked or diluted.”

Declaration on AI

The event culminated with delegates signing “the Africa Declaration on Artificial Intelligence” – outlining commitments on the part of continental leaders to support the adoption of national AI strategies and to implement governance frameworks that align with the African Union’s own AI strategy.

It is hoped that this rhetoric will also be backed by hard cash: a resolution was passed establishing a \$60bn fund to build a pan-African AI ecosystem.

Mutambasere believes that “the summit successfully positioned Africa as a critical player in the global AI conversation and highlighted the continent’s unique demographic and economic opportunities that make it a vital part of global economic development over the next 25 years.”

Akogo similarly welcomes the moves made in Kigali that have at least set Africa on the road towards harnessing the potential of AI for the continent – and forging its own solutions for its own, specific issues. “The event served as a reminder to the rest of the world that Africa is very much present within the AI landscape,” he says. ■



We need a framework for data governance in Africa – ‘data should be recognised not just as a technical input, but as a vital economic asset’

Opposite: President Paul Kagame addressing the opening of the Global AI Summit on Africa at the Kigali Convention centre.

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SPECIAL REPORT AFRICA'S TOP COMPANIES

This year's African Business ranking of the continent's top 250 companies sees a partial recovery in the value of Africa's biggest companies, but the fluctuating value of African currencies and

*ongoing global economic challenges – not least President Donald Trump's trade war and uncertainty about it – continue to weigh on corporations. **Neil Ford** reports.*

The headquarters of Media 24, owned by intenet, entertainment and media group Naspers, in Cape Town.



*This year sees a significant recovery in market values across our ranking of the top 250 African companies – but, amid the continuing effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the ongoing trade war, the total value of our Top 250 by market capitalisation is still low in dollar terms by historic standards reports **Neil Ford**.*

The top 250 African companies are recovering, but slowly

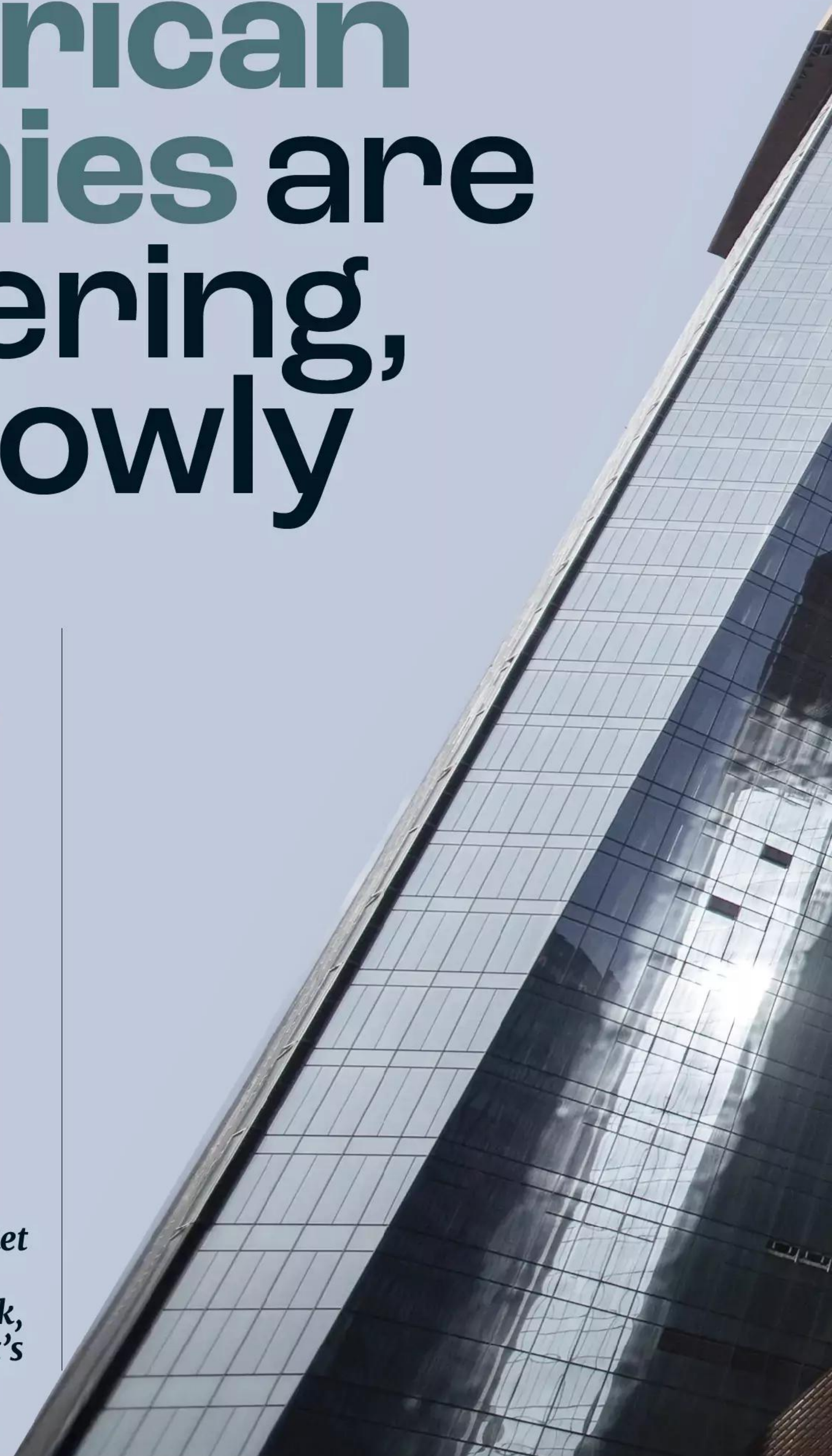
This year has seen a partial recovery in the value of Africa's biggest companies – but market capitalisations are still a lot lower than they were a decade ago. The fluctuating value of African currencies is partly to blame, as is the retreat of international investors from frontier markets because of uncertainty stemming first from the Covid-19 pandemic, then from the Russian invasion of Ukraine and now the ongoing trade war. As ever, within this overall picture some companies have done a lot better than others.

Africa's 250 biggest companies had a total market capitalisation of \$564bn at the end of March 2025, which was a significant increase on the \$503bn listed at the same time last year but is still very low by historic standards. A peak of \$948bn was achieved in 2015; the overall trend since then has been largely downwards despite the continent's rapidly growing population and undoubted economic potential. This year's figure is even lower than the \$597bn recorded in March 2020 at the height of the Covid pandemic. There are other reasons, including the delisting of some major multinationals from African exchanges.

The top ten in our 2025 rankings have a very familiar feel to them. Naspers remains the continent's biggest company

Right: the headquarters of Tencent in Shenzhen, south China.

Africa's biggest companies are recovering, but market values remain far below their 2015 peak, despite the continent's vast potential and growing population





Africa's Top 250 Companies

with a market capitalisation of \$40.3bn, up from \$31.9bn last year but still well down on the \$80.8bn recorded in 2023 and \$104.2bn in 2021. The firm's wildly fluctuating market value is largely caused by changes in the fortunes of one of its main assets, its 25% stake in Hong Kong-listed tech and entertainment company Tencent. Naspers operations, which are today relatively limited within South Africa, stretch from technology and venture capital to publishing and multimedia.

Naspers' original \$32m investment in Tencent was worth \$115bn late last year, in what was perhaps the best deal ever in African corporate history. Fabricio Bloisi, the company's new CEO, is, however, keen to widen the company's interests by identifying the next Tencent that he hopes will double the parent firm's value within ten years. He has pledged to link employee rewards more closely to results and to take more risks.

In December Bloisi said: "Innovation and reinvention are in our DNA and essential to our success. We are embracing the massive opportunity we see in deploying AI to deliver exceptional products and services to our 2bn customers... We are already showing signs of success, with peer-leading growth and rising profitability across our ecommerce portfolio."

Naspers is followed in our rankings by another five South African companies, including three banks: FirstRand, Standard Bank Group and Capitec Bank. It is still worth almost twice as much as the second-placed FirstRand, which had a value of \$21.9bn at the end of March. Capitec has enjoyed a particularly big increase in market capitalisation, from \$12.8bn to \$19.5bn over the past year, but still slightly lags miner Gold Fields, which is growing strongly as investors seek shelter from global economic uncertainty in gold.

Despite long-term stagnation in the domestic economy, South African companies fill 16 of the ranking positions in the Top 20, with Moroccan firms taking two of the other four, showing that African corporate strength remains very patchy. The performance of large Nigerian companies is particularly disappointing given the size both of Africa's biggest market and of its natural resources, but currency devaluation has much to do with this year's poor results.

Strength in depth

The significant recovery in market values recorded at the top of our table is mirrored further down the rankings. Coal firm Thungela Resources took 100th position with \$904m in 2024, but fellow South African firm, Spar Group, which operates in the wholesale distribution sector, needed \$1,238m to secure the same position this year. Similarly, Zambia National Commercial Bank needed \$334m this year to take the 250th and final place in our table, a big increase on the \$239m Bank of Africa Côte d'Ivoire recorded to take the same position last year. However, this threshold must continue to increase over the next few years to regain the \$394m level required to take the same spot as recently as 2018.

Our Top 250 African Companies survey includes firms listed on African stock exchanges but excludes some of the biggest companies operating on the continent because they are foreign enterprises listed elsewhere in the world, or state-owned companies.

Methodology – who we include in the ranking

The African Business Top 250 Companies survey focuses on the biggest listed companies, with the ranking determined by the market capitalisation (total value of the listed shares) at 31 March 2025. The market capitalisation is converted into US dollars on the same date.

Some of the African giants not in the Top 250 ranking are government-owned companies, including state-owned enterprises such as Commercial Bank of Ethiopia and Sonangol in Angola. Back in 2022, following negotiations with the IMF, Egypt again promised privatisations of state- and military-owned companies; in December 2024 Ethiopia's parliament passed legislation enabling foreign banks to enter the country's hitherto closed financial sector. Many of the 400 or so companies in Africa with revenues in excess of \$1bn are not included because they still remain in private hands. This includes the Madagascan group Axian for example.

The Top 250 survey excludes companies that have African heritage and roots but no longer earn at least 50% of their revenues in Africa. One significant example is Prosus, which emerged as Europe's largest listed consumer internet company when it became an entity independent from its parent, South Africa's Naspers. It listed on Euronext Amsterdam and the JSE in September 2019.

Companies with more than 50% of their revenues from Africa are excluded if they are not listed on an African stock exchange.

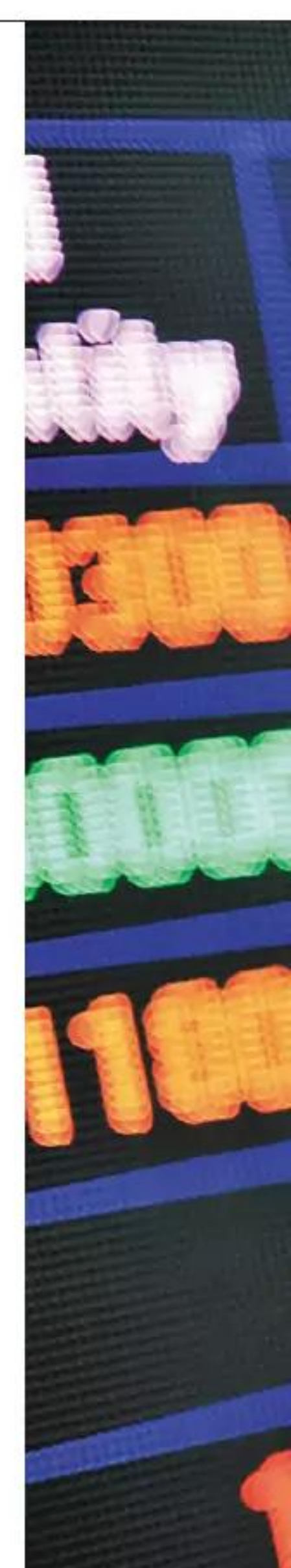
Several very large mining companies are also excluded because they are not listed on an African stock exchange. One example is London-listed Endeavour Mining, a gold miner in Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso. Another is Canada's Ivanhoe Mines, whose flagship Kamo-a-Kakula project in the Democratic Republic of Congo could expand to become the world's biggest copper mine; it also has zinc and platinum projects.

The ranking also excludes the handful of African "unicorns" – tech startups that reach a \$1bn dollar market value, but are usually not yet listed on any stock exchange. It omits real estate investment trusts and finance companies, because of the way they manage funds for unit holders. If, however, a company develops properties, then it can remain in the ranking, as does Travaux Généraux de Construction de Casablanca (TGC).

The latter include some of Africa's biggest oil and gas companies, such as Angola's Sonangol and Sonatrach of Algeria, both of which would certainly be ranked at or near the top if they were listed. The government of Angola plans an initial public offering for 30% equity in Sonangol, which would see it included in our rankings, although this has been repeatedly delayed.

South Africa still dominates

As ever, South Africa's continued dominance is reflected in the regional breakdown of the total market value of our table. South African companies account





Stock exchange index by market value

Stock Exchange	Sum of Market Value 31/03/2025
Botswana	1,854.8
BRVM – Côte d’Ivoire	13,327.3
Egypt	33,483.8
Ghana	3,647.9
Kenya	13,169.4
Malawi	8,565.5
Mauritius	4,658.0
Morocco	92,094.8
Namibia	6,010.9
Nigeria	39,888.5
South Africa	358,185.4
Tanzania	3,166.3
Tunisia	5,286.3
Ugan	1,203.4
Uganda	3,327.5
Zambia	1,543.1
Zimbabwe	5,994.6
Grand Total	595,407.3

for a massive 60% of the entire market capitalisation of our Top 250 African Companies this year, roughly the same proportion as last year. The continued dominance of South African firms is despite ongoing stagnation in the South African economy, which grew by an average of just 0.66% in the decade to 2023, according to World Bank figures. However, the country’s banks and some of its other large corporations have had significant success in growing in other parts of the African continent and indeed further afield.

The rest of Southern Africa takes 4.35%, with Malawi perhaps surprisingly strong here, taking 1.44% of the continental total, more than Tanzania, Uganda,

Above: An employee makes notes in front of an electronic stock information screen inside the Nairobi Securities Exchange.

Tunisia or Ghana. West Africa accounts for 9% and North Africa 22%, while Central Africa is again without representation. Year after year, the region fails to feature in our table, despite the presence of the Democratic Republic of Congo and Cameroon among the continent’s 15 biggest economies.

While Central Africa as a whole is an important source of oil, gas and mining commodities and other raw materials, each sector is dominated by state owned companies or large foreign firms. There is some diversification in Cameroon but few large private sector companies have emerged, emphasising the lack of linkages between raw material production and the wider economy.

The standout figure here is East Africa with just 3.5% of the value of the Top 250, virtually the same as in last year’s rankings. Despite containing some of the continent’s fastest-growing economies over the past decade in the form of Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda and Rwanda, the region still punches well below its weight in terms of listed companies. It will be interesting to see whether the launch of the new East African regional stock exchange index has an impact on driving up interest in East African equities.

On a national basis, Morocco ranks second behind South Africa in terms of the combined value of its companies within our Top 250, with 15%, followed by Nigeria with 7% – a big fall on the 7.8% recorded last year and well short of its 15.4% share of the African population – and Egypt, with 6%.

Ethiopia is perhaps the most startling absentee from both our Top 250 and the regional tables. If our Top 250 ranking were distributed in line with population, Ethiopia would have 26 companies in the table. Yet despite being the fastest-growing African economy – and the third fastest globally – over the past 20 years, not a single Ethiopian company makes either our Top 250 or regional Top 20 tables, although the government has gradually taken steps to loosen its grip on the economy over the past three years.

The government has tightly controlled many parts of the economy but is now opening them up to private sector and foreign competition. The telecoms and financial services sectors are attracting particular interest, while the country’s growing hydroelectric production is attracting data centres, but it may be many years before Ethiopian companies fill our table in the numbers that the country’s 135m population would justify.

Sector breakdown

Banks are particularly well represented in our table, with regional banks accounting for 18% of the total value of the Top 250 and major banks another 8%. Indeed, five of the six biggest listed companies in Africa are banks, with top-ranked Naspers the only exception in the higher echelons of our rankings. The banking sector is one of the biggest engines of private sector innovation on the continent, with digital services introduced by both established banks and the thriving start-up ecosystem. At the same time, insurance companies account for a total of 5% of the value of the Top 250.

The telecoms sector is the other great African private sector success story over the past quarter of a century. Private mobile telecoms companies quickly

Africa's Top 250 Companies

overtook established fixed-line operators across the continent, building the infrastructure to develop modern telecoms networks in almost every country. Vodacom and MTN of South Africa plus Morocco's Maroc Telecom are ranked 7th, 8th and 9th in our table, and the sector's biggest listed companies now represent 11% of the total value of our Top 250.

The importance of the mining sector is highlighted by the fact that non-precious metals and minerals producers account for 5.5% of our table; but too small a proportion of mining products are processed within Africa, meaning that the continent misses out on much-needed value added activity. As well as processing, the manufacturing sector remains enormously underrepresented in our table as the continent continues to fail to secure a significant share of global factory outsourcing.

Record gold price

The rising price of gold over the past year has had a big impact on the values of precious metals miners in our Top 250. The market capitalisation of South Africa's Gold Fields has increased from \$14.3bn to \$19.7bn over the past year, making it the biggest listed mining company on the continent. AngloGold Ashanti moves up from 11th to 6th as its value doubles in just a single year from \$9.3bn to \$18.7bn, while Harmony Gold Mining has also enjoyed a big rise from \$5.2bn to \$9.2bn, moving it up from 24th to 13th in our table.

Gold prices jumped 27% over 2024, with prices hitting a record \$3,350 per ounce in late April as a result of uncertainty over US President Donald Trump's new trade tariffs and the ongoing trade war. Goldman Sachs is forecasting a price of \$3,700 per ounce for the end of this year. With tariffs being imposed and then retracted or renegotiated on a regular basis, many investors are turning to the security of gold.

Gold Fields reported a 42% rise in profits for 2024 to \$1.2bn, despite a 10% fall in output. However, in April the company announced that it would end production at its Damang mine in Ghana, which accounted for 6% of the company's output of 2.15m ounces in 2024, after the government rejected its application to extend the lease. It will instead focus on its Canadian Windfall project and the Salares Norte mine in Chile, while continuing to operate its larger gold project in Ghana, the Tarkwa mine. It continues to operate in South Africa's Witwatersrand Basin.

CEO Mike Fraser has also revealed that Gold Fields may consider a share buyback programme if gold prices remain high. South African gold mining is becoming gradually more difficult as mines go ever deeper to remain productive, bringing increased costs and more technical challenges.

Harmony Gold Mining is using its increased revenues to help finance its wholly-owned Eva copper project in Queensland, Australia, as it diversifies into copper. Investment in excess of \$600m will result in output of up to 60,000 tons a year from 2029 and is supported by a 33% rise in six-month profits to R7.9bn (\$419m) for the period to the end of 2024.

It is also developing the Walfi Golpu gold and copper project in Papua New Guinea with the US Newmont Corporation. Finance director Boipelo Lekubo revealed that the company had about \$1bn in net cash and available financing to fund new projects. ■

Some of Africa's top 250 companies

Standard Bank

South Africa's Standard Bank is the third biggest company in our listing, with a rise in market value from \$16.4bn last year to \$21.6bn in this year's table. Speaking in March, CEO Sim Tshabalala said that the bank's growth was based on improving economic headwinds across the Sub-Saharan African countries in which it operates. By expanding into so many different countries it has been able to spread the risk of downturns in any particular market and counter ongoing weak growth in its domestic market.

Standard Bank is also opening a representative office in Egypt, to "enable us to better support our clients who are already active in North and East Africa, who are using Egypt as their base for multinational operations in Africa and who are trading along the Africa-Gulf Cooperation Council Corridor," said Tshabalala. The bank expects increased investment in infrastructure and more stable currencies in Africa this year.

This pattern of expanding across the continent has driven the growth of South Africa's largest banks, as well as their counterparts in Morocco and Kenya. Not only will this strategy help facilitate greater trade volumes through the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), it should also encourage other banks to follow the same policy, boosting competition in the process.

This strategy is also welcomed by Africa's multilateral lenders, with the African Development Bank and Standard Bank sealing a \$200m trade finance risk participation agreement in December to help it scale up trade finance for local banks to support small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs). This will be complemented by Standard Bank's own R3.6bn (\$194m) social bond to provide matching support for SME lending initiatives. Trade finance has struggled in recent years because of constraints in South Africa but also the wider withdrawal of Western banks from the African continent.

Sonatel

Société Nationale des Telecommunications (Sonatel), which is based in Senegal but listed on the regional West African Bourse Régionale des Valeurs Mobilières (BRVM) in Côte d'Ivoire, has enjoyed a big increase in market capitalisation over the past year – from \$2.9bn to \$4.1bn. It has moved up from 46th to 38th in our Top 250 and it is now the fourth biggest company in West Africa and the second biggest telecoms operator in the region.

Sonatel is 42.33% owned by Orange, and launched Orange 5G services for both business and residential customers in Senegal last year after paying \$57m for a 5G operating licence. It controls more than 50% of the Senegalese market and also operates in Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Mali and Sierra Leone. A large part of its growth has been generated by its Orange Money mobile service. As in much of Africa, its fixed line customer base is

relatively small, with 741,000 customers in 2024, but this was a 25% increase on the previous year.

Last year, a consortium featuring the UK government’s development financial institution British International Investment (BII), the International Finance Corporation, and Proparco agreed to invest €87m (\$99m) in the company’s telecoms infrastructure, particularly in rural areas.

Chris Chijjutomu, managing director and head of Africa at BII, commented: “Investing in the digital infrastructure space is a priority for BII given its importance to address economic growth constraints in Africa. Our investment in Sonatel will help provide quality and affordable connectivity and directly foster inclusive economic growth, particularly in rural areas. It also aligns with our goal to invest more in the Francophone West Africa region. We look forward to working with our partners to digitally connect more people and businesses in the area.”

NMB Bank

Tanzania’s NMB has continued to grow steadily and strongly, with its value increasing from \$582m

in 2022 and \$748m in 2023 to reach \$933m last year and now \$1,122m, making it the fifth-biggest listed company in East Africa and second-biggest bank in the region after Kenya’s Equity Group.

While the Tanzanian economy is far from being able to challenge Kenya in terms of GDP, its companies are becoming increasingly competitive regionally as barriers to trade and financial services are gradually reduced within the East African Community.

NMB became the first Tanzanian bank to list a bond on the London Stock Exchange. Its three-year \$73m Sustainability Bond was listed on the LSE’s International Securities Market and Sustainable Bond Market platform last April. “This not only highlights NMB’s dedication to transparency and commitment to their sustainability objectives, but also showcases the continued international investor support that issuers across Africa can find in London,” CEO of the LSE Julia Hoggett said of the NMB-Jamii bond. The Tanzanian bank has also listed a \$32m “Jasiri bond” on the Luxembourg Stock Exchange.

Managem

Moroccan firm Managem is one of the biggest risers in our table, moving up from 57th last year to 21st in our 2025 rankings as a result of a big increase in market capitalisation from \$2bn to \$6.1bn. The company, which operates in eight African countries, mines, processes and markets a wide range of commodities, including cobalt, copper, gold, silver and zinc. It has benefited from rising prices for many of its products, including for critical minerals such as copper and cobalt, which are in high demand in the energy transition, while gold prices have spiked as investors seek a hedge against volatility.

Below: Moroccan miner Managem is investing heavily in new projects.

Managem is investing heavily in new projects, including its Tizert copper mine in the Moroccan province of Taroudant, and the Boto gold project in eastern Senegal. The latter is one of several sizeable deposits located in the Senegal-Mali Shear Zone, which already contains the productive Loulou and Fekola projects. In October 2024 Managem bought the Karita gold project in Guinea from IAMGOLD as part of a wider deal with the Canadian firm for assets in Guinea, Mali and Senegal. However, it is also making strategic sales, including that of the Oumejrane copper mine in Morocco’s Drâa-Tafilalet region to Purple Hedge DWC of the UAE for \$30m in January.



Africa’s Top 250 Companies

Rank 2025	Rank 2024	Company name	Sector	Stock exchange	Market value 31/03/24 \$m	Market value 31/03/25 \$m	Net income latest \$m	Revenue latest \$m
1	1	Naspers	Internet Software/Services	South Africa	31,933.9	40,392.8	2,863.0	6,400.0
2	3	FirstRand	Major Banks	South Africa	18,286.3	21,911.0	2,126.9	7,781.2
3	4	Standard Bank Group	Regional Banks	South Africa	16,392.9	21,594.4	2,387.7	9,923.1
4	5	Gold Fields	Precious Metals	South Africa	14,363.9	19,729.4	1,245.0	5,202.0
5	6	Capitec Bank	Regional Banks	South Africa	12,849.5	19,585.7	552.3	1,881.9
6	11	Anglogold Ashanti	Precious Metals	South Africa	9,318.0	18,690.5	–	5,793.0
7	8	Attijariwafa Bank	Regional Banks	Morocco	10,802.1	15,634.3	991.6	3,600.3
8	7	Vodacom Group	Wireless Telecom	South Africa	10,813.7	14,172.8	891.8	8,225.8
9	10	MTN Group	Wireless Telecom	South Africa	9,327.7	12,625.0	–530.5	10,396.9
10	13	Maroc Telecom	Wireless Telecom	Morocco	8,688.7	11,182.9	180.9	3,686.9
11	9	Anglo American Platinum	Other Metals/Minerals	South Africa	10,766.4	10,592.9	382.7	5,909.2
12	15	Sanlam	Property/Casualty Insurance	South Africa	8,072.4	9,525.6	1,368.3	1,289.6
13	24	Harmony Gold Mining	Precious Metals	South Africa	5,173.3	9,197.5	484.5	3,463.1
14	17	Shoprite	Food Retail	South Africa	7,727.0	8,768.2	347.3	13,677.4
15	18	Absa Group	Major Banks	South Africa	6,996.3	8,606.8	1,183.8	6,043.2
16	14	Bid Corporation	Restaurants	South Africa	8,179.7	8,049.9	452.6	12,687.7
17	27	Airtel Africa	Wireless Telecom	Nigeria	5,013.0	7,844.2	–	4,979.0
18	31	Discovery	Life/Health Insurance	South Africa	4,308.7	7,372.6	416.8	3,055.4
19	21	Nedbank Group	Regional Banks	South Africa	5,894.3	6,823.1	905.8	3,956.7
20	34	Impala Platinum	Other Metals/Minerals	South Africa	3,740.0	6,191.8	–975.2	4,866.5
21	57	Managem	Other Metals/Minerals	Morocco	2,028.7	6,185.0	–	–
22	20	Banque Centrale Populaire	Regional Banks	Morocco	5,897.8	5,982.3	–	–
23	41	OUTsurance Group	Multi–Line Insurance	South Africa	3,401.0	5,860.4	226.4	1,513.1
24	58	Marsa Maroc	Other Transportation	Morocco	2,024.7	5,716.3	122.3	505.4
25	22	Safaricom	Wireless Telecom	Kenya	5,397.8	5,670.5	479.0	2,657.4
26	47	TAQA Morocco	Electric Utilities	Morocco	2,797.7	5,658.4	202.3	1,117.4
27	16	Kumba Iron Ore	Steel	South Africa	7,862.7	5,464.7	798.5	3,722.6
28	12	Dangote Cement	Construction Materials	Nigeria	8,966.8	5,330.1	334.5	2,379.6
29	38	Pepkor	Apparel/Footwear Retail	South Africa	3,671.8	5,126.2	113.9	4,678.4
30	26	Com. Inter. Bank – Egypt (CIB)	Regional Banks	Egypt	5,096.2	4,961.6	1,092.3	1,956.0
31	23	BUA Foods	Agricultural Com.	Nigeria	5,240.0	4,903.0	185.4	1,018.1
32	new	Reinet Investments	Investment Managers	South Africa	4,741.5	4,743.1	562.2	234.0
33	29	LafargeHolcim Maroc	Construction Materials	Morocco	4,585.4	4,630.4	237.7	800.7
34	39	Remgro	Financial Conglomerates	South Africa	3,664.5	4,540.6	323.2	2,807.1
35	33	Bank of Africa	Major Banks	Morocco	4,096.8	4,389.8	354.7	1,951.1
36	36	Clicks Group	Drugstore Chains	South Africa	3,722.6	4,383.3	160.6	2,566.0
37	30	Bidvest Group	Specialty Stores	South Africa	4,357.8	4,357.1	376.4	6,863.0
38	46	Société Nationale des Télécom.	Specialty Telecom	BRVM	2,947.1	4,116.9	578.5	2,845.3
39	25	Aspen Pharmacare	Pharmaceuticals: Major	South Africa	5,169.9	3,972.7	244.8	2,484.8
40	40	B2Gold	Other Metals/Minerals	Namibia	3,418.3	3,750.3	–	1,902.0
41	48	Orange Côte d'Ivoire	Wireless Telecom	BRVM	2,690.1	3,597.3	–	–
42	78	El Sewedy Electric Company	Electrical Products	Egypt	1,422.0	3,450.1	–	–
43	35	MTN Nigeria Communications	Wireless Telecom	Nigeria	3,732.5	3,352.0	–267.3	2,242.0
44	42	Sibanye–Stillwater	Precious Metals	South Africa	3,242.2	3,205.8	–392.8	6,118.9
45	52	Mr Price Group	Apparel/Footwear Retail	South Africa	2,419.4	3,130.0	179.5	1,986.2
46	45	Old Mutual	Life/Health Insurance	South Africa	2,972.8	3,049.4	471.1	4,451.9
47	51	Ciments du Maroc	Construction Materials	Morocco	2,439.9	2,908.2	108.1	437.7
48	53	Northam Platinum	Other Metals/Minerals	South Africa	2,363.0	2,820.6	101.3	1,732.8
49	43	Exxaro Resources	Coal	South Africa	3,117.1	2,817.5	421.8	2,223.7
50	44	Woolworths	Apparel/Footwear Retail	South Africa	3,091.5	2,741.6	145.9	4,293.3

Rank 2024	Rank 2023	Company name	Sector	Stock exchange	Market value 31/03/24 \$m	Market value 31/03/25 \$m	Net income latest \$m	Revenue latest \$m
51	63	Tiger Brands	Food: Major Diversified	South Africa	1,910.2	2,724.5	157.4	2,079.3
52	72	Scancom	Wireless Telecom	Ghana	1,578.4	2,724.1	-	1,065.2
53	59	MCB Group	Major Banks	Mauritius	2,022.5	2,696.9	349.2	-
54	28	Sasol	Chemicals: Major Diversified	South Africa	4,985.8	2,692.1	-2,476.7	17,387.9
55	49	Multichoice Group	Cable/Satellite TV	South Africa	2,654.7	2,640.6	118.5	2,979.6
56	NEW	Truworths	Apparel/Footwear Retail	Zimbabwe	3.2	2,582.9	-	-
57	65	Santam	Multi-Line Insurance	South Africa	1,811.1	2,335.8	200.1	1,663.6
58	73	Momentum Group	Life/Health Insurance	South Africa	1,503.1	2,331.9	224.9	-
59	117	TGC de Casablanca	Engineering & Construction	Morocco	781.8	2,299.9	-	-
60	66	Foschini Group	Apparel/Footwear Retail	South Africa	1,740.2	2,237.6	160.4	2,975.2
61	64	Cosumar	Agricultural Com.	Morocco	1,880.8	2,217.5	103.9	1,283.9
62	50	Talaat Moustafa Group Holding	Real Estate Development	Egypt	2,546.4	2,166.8	-	-
63	82	Eastern Company	Tobacco	Egypt	1,310.1	1,972.5	162.8	414.6
64	158	FMB Capital	Regional Banks	Malawi	538.8	1,963.2	-	-
65	108	Douja Promotion Groupe Addoha	Real Estate Development	Morocco	855.4	1,905.4	-	-
66	109	Akdital	Hospital/Nursing Mgt.	Morocco	845.1	1,867.3	32.9	298.1
67	62	Geregu Power	Electric Utilities	Nigeria	1,915.7	1,859.6	-	-
68	75	Wafa Assurance	Multi-Line Insurance	Morocco	1,470.2	1,853.6	-	-
69	37	BUA Cement	Construction Materials	Nigeria	3,716.0	1,847.1	50.9	337.0
70	19	Investec	Investment Banks/Brokers	South Africa	6,539.4	1,828.8	-	-
71	56	Transcorp Power	Electric Utilities	Nigeria	2,166.7	1,783.4	-	-
72	60	African Rainbow Minerals	Other Metals/Minerals	South Africa	1,951.5	1,782.3	233.1	642.1
73	NEW	Boxer Retail	Restaurants	South Africa	#N/A	1,745.4	-	-
74	85	TotalEnergies Marketing Maroc	Specialty Stores	Morocco	1,239.8	1,720.4	-	-
75	54	Misr Fertilizers Prod. Com. MOPCO	Chemicals: Agricultural	Egypt	2,274.8	1,676.3	-	-
76	138	National Bank of Malawi	Major Banks	Malawi	646.3	1,669.9	-	-
77	96	MTN Uganda	Major Telecommunications	Uganda	978.4	1,657.8	-	788.6
78	new	GetBucks Microfinance Bank	Finance/Rental/Leasing	Zimbabwe	2.0	1,651.3	-	-
79	70	AVI	Food: Specialty/Candy	South Africa	1,634.9	1,639.3	126.5	886.0
80	69	Truworths International	Apparel/Footwear Retail	South Africa	1,646.6	1,598.3	217.6	1,256.2
81	77	Afriquia Gaz	Wholesale Distributors	Morocco	1,427.0	1,536.7	95.7	885.4
82	87	Guaranty Trust Holding Company	Regional Banks	Nigeria	1,184.0	1,530.5	65.2	132.5
83	132	Ezz Steel Company	Steel	Egypt	678.6	1,436.1	261.8	3,015.1
84	113	Egypt Aluminum	Aluminum	Egypt	812.5	1,423.4	186.4	674.5
85	68	Abou Kir Fertilizers & Chemical Ind.	Chemicals: Agricultural	Egypt	1,679.6	1,418.8	273.9	376.6
86	74	Dis-Chem Pharmacies	Drugstore Chains	South Africa	1,477.1	1,417.0	52.2	1,927.2
87	NEW	Aradel	Integrated Oil	Nigeria	#N/A	1,415.7	161.5	382.3
88	80	Equity Group	Regional Banks	Kenya	1,350.5	1,374.6	359.9	-
89	89	Crédit Immobilier et Hôtelier	Regional Banks	Morocco	1,106.4	1,341.0	90.9	492.1
90	128	DRDGOLD	Precious Metals	South Africa	729.2	1,335.1	-	349.1
91	83	Label'Vie	Food Retail	Morocco	1,301.4	1,331.0	54.7	1,657.0
92	98	Crédit du Maroc (Ste)	Regional Banks	Morocco	945.3	1,327.7	-	-
93	115	Karooooo	Internet Software/Services	South Africa	775.6	1,314.2	-	225.0
94	92	Banque Int. Arabe de Tunisie	Regional Banks	Tunisia	1,036.0	1,301.9	120.4	531.5
95	76	Qatar National Bank	Regional Banks	Egypt	1,455.6	1,277.0	503.6	1,061.7
96	193	Alliances Dev. immobiliere (Ste)	Real Estate Development	Morocco	427.7	1,272.5	-	-
97	91	Zenith Bank	Regional Banks	Nigeria	1,070.6	1,257.9	684.1	2,457.6
98	243	FDH Bank	Major Banks	Malawi	259.0	1,254.7	-	-
99	90	Alexandria Containers & Goods	Other Transportation	Egypt	1,074.9	1,244.9	116.0	135.3
100	102	Spar Group	Wholesale Distributors	South Africa	899.5	1,238.1	91.0	8,413.5

Africa’s Top 250 Companies

Rank 2025	Rank 2024	Company name	Sector	Stock exchange	Market value 31/03/24 \$m	Market value 31/03/24 \$m	Net income latest \$m	Revenue latest \$m
101	93	PSG Financial Services	Investment Banks/Brokers	South Africa	1,034.1	1,238.0	58.4	273.0
102	84	Tanzania Breweries	Beverages: Alcoholic	Tanzania	1,255.1	1,203.4	–	–
103	79	Telecom Egypt	Major Telecom	Egypt	1,360.6	1,191.6	321.7	1,593.9
104	71	Sappi	Pulp & Paper	South Africa	1,599.3	1,189.8	33.0	5,458.0
105	99	NMB Bank	Regional Banks	Tanzania	932.7	1,122.5	–	–
106	103	Soc. Gen. de Ban. en Côte d'Ivoire	Major Banks	BRVM	886.2	1,122.0	–	–
107	174	Pick n Pay Stores	Food Retail	South Africa	742.9	1,112.1	–173.9	6,122.5
108	81	Life Healthcare Group	Hospital/Nursing Mgmt	South Africa	1,332.0	1,103.4	120.1	1,402.3
109	116	East African Breweries	Food Distributors	Kenya	783.3	1,100.8	–	–
110	143	Barloworld	Wholesale Distributors	South Africa	611.1	1,089.9	105.1	2,316.0
111	161	Standard Bank Malawi	Investment Banks/Brokers	Malawi	534.6	1,074.9	–	–
112	88	Soc. de Fab. des Boissons de Tun.	Beverages: Non–Alcoholic	Tunisia	1,145.3	1,048.4	85.7	454.8
113	127	KCB Group	Regional Banks	Kenya	732.9	1,047.5	464.7	–
114	114	TelkomSOC	Major Telecom	South Africa	809.8	1,031.9	103.8	2,387.6
115	104	Airtel Uganda	Wireless Telecom	Uganda	874.0	1,026.3	–	–
116	131	Banque Attijari de Tunisie	Regional Banks	Tunisia	698.4	1,004.8	76.1	237.8
117	101	Netcare	Hospital/Nursing Mgmt	South Africa	903.6	996.3	78.3	1,397.3
118	111	ADvTECH	Miscellaneous Com. Services	South Africa	831.7	993.0	62.1	468.6
119	new	We Buy Cars	Specialty Stores	South Africa	#N/A	955.7	–	–
120	106	First National Bank of Botswana	Major Banks	Botswana	861.0	950.0	–	–
121	197	Premier Group	Food Distributors	South Africa	416.1	904.8	50.2	1,010.9
122	120	Transcorp Hotels	Hotels/Resorts/Cruiselines	Nigeria	768.4	903.4	–	–
123	141	Ecobank Côte d'Ivoire	Regional Banks	BRVM	634.0	893.9	–	–
124	167	Emaar Misr for Development	Real Estate Development	Egypt	512.2	892.9	–	–
125	148	Standard Chartered Bank Kenya	Regional Banks	Kenya	567.2	874.5	155.0	–
126	123	AtlantaSanad	Multi–Line Insurance	Morocco	738.8	870.2	–	–
127	209	Egyptian Iron & Steel	Steel	Egypt	343.1	853.6	–	–
128	126	Sothema	Pharmaceuticals: Major	Morocco	733.0	851.6	–	–
129	112	Motus	Wholesale Distributors	South Africa	823.7	848.7	139.8	6,323.1
130	124	Lesieur Cristal	Food: Specialty/Candy	Morocco	734.6	832.1	16.0	544.0
131	122	Banque Maroc. pour le Com. et l'Ind.	Regional Banks	Morocco	748.1	827.4	–	–
132	86	First HoldCo	Regional Banks	Nigeria	1,222.3	823.1	489.5	2,213.3
133	125	United Bank for Africa	Major Banks	Nigeria	733.8	822.4	–	–
134	150	Coronation Fund Managers	Investment Managers	South Africa	558.4	818.7	–	–
135	159	CFG BankClass A	Regional Banks	Morocco	538.0	818.0	26.4	–
136	219	Airtel Malawi	Wireless Telecom	Malawi	317.7	813.7	–	–
137	146	Absa Bank Kenya	Regional Banks	Kenya	575.1	798.1	161.4	485.5
138	157	EFG Holding S.A.E.	Investment Banks/Brokers	Egypt	543.5	793.7	–	–
139	168	Copperbelt Energy Corporation	Electric Utilities	Zambia	510.0	791.6	–	–
140	97	Egypt Kuwait Holding Co.	Financial Conglomerates	Egypt	971.6	780.1	–	–
141	105	e–fin. for Digital & Financial Invest.	Packaged Software	Egypt	862.4	779.2	–	–
142	135	Access	Major Banks	Nigeria	667.3	776.5	469.4	154.8
143	181	Lafarge Africa	Construction Materials	Nigeria	469.7	774.6	66.6	463.1
144	100	Thungela Resources	Alternative Power Gen.	South Africa	904.3	770.9	178.8	1,966.2
145	149	Sanlam Maroc	Multi–Line Insurance	Morocco	565.6	769.5	68.3	701.1
146	226	Sonasid	Steel	Morocco	289.1	769.5	16.7	569.2
147	67	African Rainbow Capital Invest.	Financial Conglomerates	South Africa	1,707.9	762.6	–	–
148	145	CRDB Bank	Regional Banks	Tanzania	581.0	762.3	–	–
149	new	Jet Contractors	Engineering & Construction	Morocco	126.4	755.0	–	–
150	213	Delta Holding	Industrial Conglomerates	Morocco	327.3	745.9	–	–

Rank 2025	Rank 2024	Company name	Sector	Stock exchange	Market value 31/03/24 \$m	Market value 31/03/25 \$m	Net income latest \$m	Revenue latest \$m
151	94	Delta Corporation	Beverages: Alcoholic	Zimbabwe	0.4	743.7	100.5	767.9
152	152	Illovo Sugar (Malawi)	Agricultural Com.	Malawi	555.5	737.3	-	-
153	129	Italtile	Specialty Stores	South Africa	711.9	736.6	85.1	511.8
154	182	Société Ivoirienne de Banque	Major Banks	BRVM	469.2	732.8	-	-
155	134	Co-operative Bank of Kenya	Regional Banks	Kenya	668.0	726.0	-	-
156	185	Datatec	Information Tech. Services	South Africa	459.3	713.0	45.8	5,457.9
157	142	MAS	Real Estate Development	South Africa	622.5	702.8	57.6	78.5
158	169	Wilson Bayly Holmes-Ovcon	Engineering & Construction	South Africa	509.7	697.3	56.5	1,535.4
159	NEW	Nigerian Breweries	Beverages: Alcoholic	Nigeria	231.1	688.5	-35.2	715.2
160	130	FirstRand Namibia	Major Banks	Namibia	699.2	682.5	98.3	-
161	154	NCBA Group	Major Banks	Kenya	547.7	668.9	-	-
162	136	Crytel Mauritius	Wholesale Distributors	Mauritius	664.5	664.5	-	-
163	110	Golden Pyramids Plaza	Real Estate Development	Egypt	833.5	658.5	-	-
164	133	Vodacom Tanzania	Specialty Telecom	Tanzania	673.1	645.4	-	-
165	186	Stanbic Uganda	Regional Banks	Uganda	447.4	643.4	-	-
166	151	Stanbic IBTC	Regional Banks	Nigeria	556.0	642.5	131.8	533.5
167	55	Deep Yellow	Other Metals/Minerals	Namibia	766.3	642.4	-	-
168	191	Poulina Group Holding	Agricultural Com.	Tunisia	436.3	641.4	43.0	1,093.1
169	137	Tanzania Cigarette Co.	Tobacco	Tanzania	663.4	636.1	-	-
170	118	Hosken Consolidated Investments	Casinos/Gaming	South Africa	777.7	634.2	-	-
171	153	Aradei Capital	Internet Software/Services	Morocco	554.2	631.7	-	60.3
172	162	Fawry For Banking Tech. Elec. Pay.	Packaged Software	Egypt	525.4	627.8	27.9	108.9
173	NEW	Padenga	Precious Metals	Zimbabwe	0.8	624.8	-	-
174	234	Fidelity Bank	Regional Banks	Nigeria	269.8	621.7	176.8	552.9
175	121	Société des Boissons du Maroc	Beverages: Alcoholic	Morocco	754.8	617.1	40.3	281.5
176	207	Juhayna Food Industries	Food: Meat/Fish/Dairy	Egypt	350.3	614.3	58.9	516.5
177	206	Southern Sun	Hotels/Resorts/Cruiselines	South Africa	357.3	605.7	46.5	328.4
178	139	Reunert	Electronics/Appliances	South Africa	644.7	601.4	57.5	800.9
179	177	Capricorn Group	Regional Banks	Namibia	482.0	599.2	98.0	-
180	166	Omnia	Chemicals: Agricultural	South Africa	514.7	594.6	61.9	1,183.8
181	160	Housing & Development Bank	Regional Banks	Egypt	537.4	592.7	224.1	401.0
182	new	NBS Bank	Regional Banks	Malawi	184.5	584.2	-	-
183	new	CMGP Group	Industrial Machinery	Morocco	#N/A	582.4	-	-
184	171	Sun International	Hotels/Resorts/Cruiselines	South Africa	498.9	582.0	119.6	695.4
185	198	JSE	Investment Banks/Brokers	South Africa	405.6	581.7	-	-
186	170	Coris Bank International	Regional Banks	BRVM	500.3	566.5	-	-
187	NEW	International Breweries	Beverages: Alcoholic	Nigeria	91.6	559.3	-99.4	315.9
188	164	AECI	Industrial Specialties	South Africa	517.8	558.0	-0.1	1,906.4
189	156	Crédit Agricole Egypt	Major Banks	Egypt	545.9	551.5	159.6	271.9
190	163	Faisal Islamic Bank of Egypt	Regional Banks	Egypt	521.6	547.5	-	-
191	new	Agricultural Development Bank	Regional Banks	Ghana	132.5	539.5	-	-
192	188	Alexander Forbes Group	Investment Managers	South Africa	442.4	535.9	-	-
193	195	Attacq	Real Estate Development	South Africa	421.8	527.4	33.8	141.5
194	155	Nestle Nigeria	Food: Major Diversified	Nigeria	546.7	526.9	-109.6	605.3
195	237	Orascom Development Egypt	Homebuilding	Egypt	263.1	525.3	-	-
196	61	Ninety One.	Investment Managers	South Africa	1,932.9	519.1	209.1	-
197	184	Super Group	Air Freight/Couriers	South Africa	461.4	517.6	50.5	3,615.3
198	140	IBL	Industrial Conglomerates	Mauritius	637.4	514.3	-	-
199	new	Presco	Food: Specialty/Candy	Nigeria	177.4	511.5	69.5	132.1
200	190	Abu Dhabi Islamic Bank – Egypt	Regional Banks	Egypt	438.8	509.9	182.6	349.2

Africa’s Top 250 Companies

Rank 2025	Rank 2024	Company name	Sector	Stock exchange	Market value 31/03/24 \$m	Market value 31/03/25 \$m	Net income latest \$m	Revenue latest \$m
201	173	Afrimat	Construction Materials	South Africa	487.7	506.6	43.3	333.9
202	201	Stanbic	Regional Banks	Kenya	379.6	494.5	–	–
203	194	Hightech Payment Systems	Packaged Software	Morocco	423.1	476.8	–	–
204	211	Six of Oct. Dev. & Invest. (SODIC)	Real Estate Development	Egypt	334.9	469.9	–	–
205	196	Botswana Insurance Holding	Life/Health Insurance	Botswana	419.0	468.1	–	–
206	180	RCL Foods	Food: Meat/Fish/Dairy	South Africa	470.1	467.7	92.1	1,453.2
207	144	Tsogo Sun	Casinos/Gaming	South Africa	599.0	467.7	83.7	623.0
208	new	NICO	Multi–Line Insurance	Malawi	120.1	467.4	–	–
209	new	Altron	Information Tech. Services	South Africa	239.1	464.7	–7.7	452.8
210	178	Grindrod	Marine Shipping	South Africa	478.5	462.6	–	–
211	204	AMEN Bank	Regional Banks	Tunisia	367.7	454.6	71.9	185.5
212	183	Banque de Tunisie	Regional Banks	Tunisia	461.9	448.7	60.3	165.4
213	200	Beltone Holding	Investment Banks/Brokers	Egypt	397.7	447.9	–	–
214	172	Adcock Ingram	Pharmaceuticals: Major	South Africa	492.9	447.1	45.2	535.9
215	218	Risma	Hotels/Resorts/Cruiselines	Morocco	320.0	446.3	19.4	127.6
216	227	CA Sales Holdings	Wholesale Distributors	South Africa	285.2	442.7	–	–
217	new	BICICI	Major Banks	BRVM	203.1	438.9	–	–
218	199	Absa Bank Botswana	Regional Banks	Botswana	401.6	436.7	–	–
219	224	Raubex Group	Engineering & Construction	South Africa	296.7	435.7	46.3	951.8
220	229	GB Corp	Wholesale Distributors	Egypt	282.1	434.7	82.3	1,065.1
221	NEW	Oando	Oil Refining/Marketing	Nigeria	110.5	424.3	–	–
222	225	SBM	Regional Banks	Mauritius	292.1	422.0	–	–
223	187	Zambia Sugar	Agricultural Com.	Zambia	444.8	417.2	–	–
224	NEW	Brait	Investment Managers	South Africa	95.5	415.8	–	–
225	231	I&M Group	Regional Banks	Kenya	276.8	413.7	–	–
226	new	Palm Hills Development Co.	Real Estate Development	Egypt	209.8	411.3	–	–
227	175	Oceana Group	Food: Meat/Fish/Dairy	South Africa	485.6	409.3	61.6	556.0
228	241	Société Metallurgique d'Imiter	Other Metals/Minerals	Morocco	259.2	408.3	–	–
229	250	Bank of Africa Côte d'Ivoire	Regional Banks	BRVM	239.4	402.5	–	–
230	107	Econet Wireless Zimbabwe	Wireless Telecommunications	Zimbabwe	0.3	391.9	–	–
231	215	Auto Hall	Specialty Stores	Morocco	322.7	391.7	–	–
232	new	Solibra	Beverages: Alcoholic	BRVM	225.6	390.3	–	–
233	233	PPC	Construction Materials	South Africa	270.8	388.6	4.8	554.2
234	202	Export Dev. Bank of Egypt	Regional Banks	Egypt	376.8	387.5	–	–
235	new	Delice Holding	Food Distributors	Tunisia	198.4	386.5	30.7	459.5
236	192	Sidi Kerir Petrochemicals	Chemicals: Specialty	Egypt	434.0	386.2	38.9	279.8
237	179	Edita Food Industries	Food: Specialty/Candy	Ghana	472.3	384.3	28.5	318.6
238	217	Astral Foods	Agricultural Com.	South Africa	321.4	380.4	41.8	1,136.3
239	new	Blue Label Telecoms	Wholesale Distributors	South Africa	225.8	376.6	–	–
240	246	Nestle Côte d'Ivoire	Food: Specialty/Candy	BRVM	250.5	363.3	–	–
241	new	TotalEnergies Mktg. Côte d'Ivoire	Oil Refining/Marketing	BRVM	181.4	360.8	–	–
242	236	CIEL	Apparel/Footwear	Mauritius	263.1	360.2	46.2	788.6
243	208	Ecobank Transnational, Inc.	Investment Banks/Brokers	Nigeria	344.5	351.5	332.2	–
244	new	Stadio Pty.	Miscellaneous Com.	South Africa	217.8	348.7	–	–
245	210	KAP	Air Freight/Couriers	South Africa	342.4	344.1	64.6	1,636.8
246	new	NSIA Banque Côte d'Ivoire	Regional Banks	BRVM	231.7	342.1	–	–
247	new	Compagnie Minière de Touissit	Other Metals/Minerals	Morocco	192.8	340.4	25.1	63.4
248	new	Okomu Oil Palm Co.	Agricultural Com.	Nigeria	177.6	338.9	22.6	85.8
249	221	Mobile Telecommunications	Specialty Telecom	Namibia	308.9	336.4	41.0	172.4
250	203	Zambia National Com.Bank	Regional Banks	Zambia	368.6	334.3	–	–



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North Africa

Moroccan companies power ahead

Dominance of our table of the Top 20 biggest listed companies in North Africa has always been a duopoly, with Egypt and Morocco leading the rankings. Once more, not a single company from the other three North African countries is big enough to be listed. Libya's absence is easy enough to understand, given ongoing division and conflict in the country, but Algeria's exclusion highlights the limits of the government's continuing economic strategy.

Algeria has the fourth biggest economy in Africa, behind South Africa, Nigeria and Egypt and ahead of Morocco; but it has no companies listed in either our North Africa Top 20 table or even in the wider Top 250. Algiers has talked about diversifying its economy away from the current reliance on oil and gas for 20 years – but has made relatively little progress and private sector participation in key parts of the economy remains restricted.

Although none are big enough to make the regional Top 20, Tunisia has seven companies, including three

banks, in our Top 250. A more open economy than Algeria, it has made the most of its proximity to European markets to the north by building export-oriented sectors that tap into global supply chains. However, its smaller population means that its biggest companies are not on the same scale as those in Morocco or Egypt.

Morocco's lead over Egypt seems to grow stronger every year. The six biggest listed companies in North Africa are all Moroccan and there are only two Egyptian companies among the top 13. Indeed, the number of Egyptian corporations in the regional Top 20 has fallen from seven in 2024 to five in this year's table. The Egyptian government has managed to stabilise its economy over the past year and has pledged to privatise state owned companies, while reducing the military's influence over important parts of the economy, but it has been making the same promises for many years. In the meantime, Moroccan companies go from strength to strength.

Attijariwafa Bank remains the biggest listed company in the region, with a big rise in value from \$10.8bn last year to \$15.6bn in our 2025 table, followed by Maroc Telecom, which is up from \$8.7bn to \$11.1bn. Managem comes third; we profile it this month (see page 27). It is followed closely by Banque Centrale Populaire; transport operator Marsa Maroc, which is heavily involved in Africa's biggest port, Tanger Med; and power company TAGA Maroc.

Commercial International Bank remains Egypt's biggest company but it is gradually sliding down our rankings. Continued growth of Morocco's biggest companies means that Misr Fertilizers Production Company needed \$1.7bn to secure 20th position in our regional table this year, up from the \$1.3bn recorded by tobacco maker Eastern Company in 2024. ■

Morocco dominates North Africa's corporate rankings as Algeria lags behind, highlighting the impact of open markets versus restrictive policies

Region	Rank	Company name	Sector	Stock exchange	Market value 31/03/24 \$m	Market value 31/03/25 \$m	Net income latest \$m	Revenue latest \$m
1	7	Attijariwafa Bank	Regional Banks	Morocco	10,802.1	15,634.3	991.6	3,600.3
2	10	Maroc Telecom	Wireless Telecom	Morocco	8,688.7	11,182.9	180.9	3,686.9
3	21	Managem	Other Metals/Minerals	Morocco	2,028.7	6,185.0	-	-
4	22	Banque Centrale Populaire	Regional Banks	Morocco	5,897.8	5,982.3	-	-
5	24	Marsa Maroc	Other Transportation	Morocco	2,024.7	5,716.3	122.3	505.4
6	26	TAQA Morocco	Electric Utilities	Morocco	2,797.7	5,658.4	202.3	1,117.4
7	30	Com. Inter.Bank – Egypt (CIB)	Regional Banks	Egypt	5,096.2	4,961.6	1,092.3	1,956.0
8	33	LafargeHolcim Maroc	Construction Materials	Morocco	4,585.4	4,630.4	237.7	800.7
9	35	Bank of Africa	Major Banks	Morocco	4,096.8	4,389.8	354.7	1,951.1
10	42	El Sewedy Elec. Com.	Electrical Products	Egypt	1,422.0	3,450.1	-	-
11	47	Ciments du Maroc	Construction Materials	Morocco	2,439.9	2,908.2	108.1	437.7
12	59	TGC de Casablanca	Engineering & Constr.	Morocco	781.8	2,299.9	-	-
13	61	Cosumar	Agricultural Com.	Morocco	1,880.8	2,217.5	103.9	1,283.9
14	62	Talaat Moustafa Grp. Holding	Real Estate Development	Egypt	2,546.4	2,166.8	-	-
15	63	Eastern Company	Tobacco	Egypt	1,310.1	1,972.5	162.8	414.6
16	65	Douja Promotion Grp. Addoha	Real Estate Development	Morocco	855.4	1,905.4	-	-
17	66	Akdital	Hospital/Nursing Mgmt	Morocco	845.1	1,867.3	32.9	298.1
18	68	Wafa Assurance	Multi-Line Insurance	Morocco	1,470.2	1,853.6	-	-
19	74	TotalEnergies Mktg. Maroc	Specialty Stores	Morocco	1,239.8	1,720.4	-	-
20	75	Misr Fert. Prod. Com. MOPCO	Chemicals: Agricultural	Egypt	2,274.8	1,676.3	-	-

SPECIAL REPORT

GCC – Africa

Spotlighting opportunities along the UAE–Africa corridor

2nd Africa Debate - UAE edition | 30 September 2025

Following ten successful iterations of The Africa Debate in London, Invest Africa is excited to host the conference in the UAE – the largest investor in Africa among the GCC states. Now in its second year The Africa Debate – UAE will take place in Dubai on 30 September 2025. African Business' GCC–Africa Supplement scheduled for publication in August will explore the evolving economic and trade connections and outline future priorities especially in the context of tectonic shifts in global trade.

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West Africa

Ivorian growth and Nigerian struggles

Dangote Cement has been knocked off the top of our table of the Top 20 companies in West Africa after three consecutive years in which its value has fallen, from a peak of \$11.2bn in 2022 to \$9bn last year and now \$5.3bn. BUA Foods too has seen a decline, from \$5.2bn in 2024 to \$4.9bn in this year's rankings, as the devaluation of the naira affects Nigerian share prices when quoted in US dollars. Both companies have been leapfrogged by Airtel Africa, up from \$5bn to \$7.8bn. Although listed in Nigeria, its wider geographical growth has more than compensated for the falling value of the naira.

It has been a strong year overall for Ivorian companies, with four entries in our table in 2024. There is just a single Ghanaian company in our regional table, Scancom, which has enjoyed a big rise in value from \$1.6bn to \$2.7bn in just 12 months. The lack of Ghanaian entrants reflects the wide malaise in that country's economy, which has recorded modest growth after defaulting on its debts and undergoing a well-publicised debt restructuring

Despite the relatively low combined market capitalisation of Africa's 250 biggest listed companies, the value of companies listed on the regional West African Bourse Régionale des Valeurs Mobilières (BRVM), based in Côte d'Ivoire, closed 2024 at a record CFA20.6 trillion

francs (\$36bn), up from CFA18.3bn one year earlier. The value of total transactions also increased from CFA396bn to CFA462bn over the year, as the BRVM all-share index covering all 47 listed companies, including Sonatel and Orange, increased by 28.9% over the year to 276 points.

Nigeria's banks, which dominate the regional West African table, have been greatly affected by the need to recapitalise; naira depreciation over the past decade has reduced their dollar-denominated capital, while the economy has experienced a string of crises. The Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) lifted its minimum capital requirements to N500bn (\$310m) for those with an international licence and N25bn (\$16m) for nationally licensed banks. Banks must reach these levels by the end of March 2026 by injecting additional equity, opting for a lower tier banking licence, or consolidation.

Previous CBN intervention has triggered intense consolidation, most recently in 2005, but the pool of competitors is already much smaller than on the last occasion, with ten banks holding about 90% of the Nigerian banking system's assets. It remains to be seen whether the recapitalisation process creates a handful of larger banks that may once again trouble the highest rankings in our 2026 table.

The policy will "help top Nigerian banks better compete against international and other pan-African banking groups, particularly in trade finance," according to analysts S&P Global. It added: "By strengthening their balance sheets, some mid-tier banks will be able to scale their lending to the real economy and improve credit intermediation."

Despite the fall in many Nigerian stocks, Lafarge Africa needed \$774m to take the final position in our regional table, well up on the \$556m Stanbic IBTC Holdings recorded last year to take the same spot. ■

Region	Rank	Company name	Sector	Stock exchange	Market value 31/03/24 \$m	Market value 31/03/25 \$m	Net income latest \$m	Revenue latest \$m
1	17	Airtel Africa	Wireless Telecom	Nigeria	5,013.0	7,844.2	-	4,979.0
2	28	Dangote Cement	Construction Materials	Nigeria	8,966.8	5,330.1	334.5	2,379.6
3	31	BUA Foods	Agricultural Com.	Nigeria	5,240.0	4,903.0	185.4	1,018.1
4	38	Société Nationale des Télécom	Specialty Telecom	BRVM	2,947.1	4,116.9	578.5	2,845.3
5	41	Orange Côte d'Ivoire	Wireless Telecom	BRVM	2,690.1	3,597.3	-	-
6	43	MTN Nigeria Communications	Wireless Telecom	Nigeria	3,732.5	3,352.0	-267.3	2,242.0
7	52	Scancom	Wireless Telecom	Ghana	1,578.4	2,724.1	-	1,065.2
8	67	Geregu Power	Electric Utilities	Nigeria	1,915.7	1,859.6	-	-
9	69	BUA Cement	Construction Materials	Nigeria	3,716.0	1,847.1	50.9	337.0
10	71	Transcorp Power	Electric Utilities	Nigeria	2,166.7	1,783.4	-	-
11	82	Guaranty Trust Hdg. Company	Regional Banks	Nigeria	1,184.0	1,530.5	65.2	132.5
12	87	Aradel	Integrated Oil	Nigeria	#N/A	1,415.7	161.5	382.3
13	97	Zenith Bank	Regional Banks	Nigeria	1,070.6	1,257.9	684.1	2,457.6
14	106	Soc. Gen. de Ban. en Côte d'Ivoire	Major Banks	BRVM	886.2	1,122.0	-	-
15	122	Transcorp Hotels	Hotels/Resorts	Nigeria	768.4	903.4	-	-
16	123	Ecobank Côte d'Ivoire	Regional Banks	BRVM	634.0	893.9	-	-
17	132	First HoldCo	Regional Banks	Nigeria	1,222.3	823.1	489.5	2,213.3
18	133	United Bank for Africa	Major Banks	Nigeria	733.8	822.4	-	-
19	142	Access	Major Banks	Nigeria	667.3	776.5	469.4	154.8
20	143	Lafarge Africa	Construction Materials	Nigeria	469.7	774.6	66.6	463.1

East Africa

Slow and steady progress

Although East African companies remain hugely underrepresented in our Top 250 in comparison with the region's population, they are making steady progress. The value of the East African firms listed in our table has increased from \$18.3bn last year to \$20.8bn for 2025, largely because of a \$1.6bn rise in the value of the Kenyan companies included. It is unclear what impact the April launch of the East Africa Securities Exchanges Association's new stock exchange index will have on Kenya's dominant position. The new index includes companies from Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda, including Safaricom, KCB Group and Equity Group Holdings, among a host of Kenyan banks, Tanzania Breweries, Tanga Cement Company, MTN Uganda, Stanbic Uganda and MTN Rwandacell. The index has been developed by the Kenya Bankers Association, which is also its anchor shareholder, and development agency FSD Africa, which is providing technical support. It is backed by securities exchanges across the region, including those in Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda and Ethiopia. In February, it received regulatory approval from the Kenyan Capital Markets Authority to operate an over-the-counter securities exchange and to function as an autonomous self-regulatory organisation.

Aside from equities, it will also provide a platform for trading repurchase agreements and treasury securities. FSD Africa's director for capital markets, Evans Osano, commented: "This is the most significant capital market infrastructure development in Kenya and the wider East African region in decades. It promises to uplift the regional fixed income markets to world class status and will be instrumental in mobilising at scale long term local currency financing for the East African economies."

January 2025 finally saw the opening of Ethiopia's first stock exchange in decades. Michael Habte, its chief operating officer, is confident that it will secure additional listings, noting that the long-term goal is to have around 90 listings within the first decade of operation – many likely to be state companies that list – but the ESX remains a work in progress for now.

Safaricom is the biggest company in East Africa by some distance, with a market capitalisation more than three times that of fellow telecoms operator MTN Uganda. Partly owned by the UK's Vodafone and the Kenyan government, it raised \$116m in September from the second tranche of a sustainability-linked loan from a consortium of four local banks: Absa, KCB, Standard Chartered Kenya and Stanbic. Part of the money will be used to switch its power generation from diesel to renewables in support of its sustainability programme.

MTN Uganda's value has jumped markedly from \$978m last year to \$1,657m in our 2025 survey, leapfrogging Kenya's Equity Group in the process and becoming the highest ranked Ugandan company ever in our table. Indeed, with Tanzania Breweries and NMB Bank, also of Tanzania, filling the fourth and fifth places in our regional table, Kenya is far from having it all its own way at the top of the regional table. ■

Region	Rank	Company name	Sector	Stock exchange	Market value 31/03/24 \$m	Market value 31/03/25 \$m	Net income latest \$m	Revenue latest \$m
1	25	Safaricom	Wireless Telecom	Kenya	5,397.8	5,670.5	479.0	2,657.4
2	77	MTN Uganda	Major Telecom	Uganda	978.4	1,657.8	-	788.6
3	88	Equity Group	Regional Banks	Kenya	1,350.5	1,374.6	359.9	-
4	102	Tanzania Breweries	Beverages: Alcoholic	Ugan	1,255.1	1,203.4	-	-
5	105	NMB Bank	Regional Banks	Tanzania	932.7	1,122.5	-	-
6	109	East African Breweries	Food Distributors	Kenya	783.3	1,100.8	-	-
7	113	KCB Group	Regional Banks	Kenya	732.9	1,047.5	464.7	-
8	115	Airtel Uganda	Wireless Telecom	Uganda	874.0	1,026.3	-	-
9	125	Standard Chartered Bank Kenya	Regional Banks	Kenya	567.2	874.5	155.0	-
10	137	Absa Bank Kenya	Regional Banks	Kenya	575.1	798.1	161.4	485.5
11	148	CRDB Bank	Regional Banks	Tanzania	581.0	762.3	-	-
12	155	Co-operative Bank of Kenya	Regional Banks	Kenya	668.0	726.0	-	-
13	161	NCBA Group	Major Banks	Kenya	547.7	668.9	-	-
14	164	Vodacom Tanzania	Specialty Telecom	Tanzania	673.1	645.4	-	-
15	165	Stanbic Uganda	Regional Banks	Uganda	447.4	643.4	-	-
16	169	Tanzania Cigarette Co.	Tobacco	Tanzania	663.4	636.1	-	-
17	202	Stanbic	Regional Banks	Kenya	379.6	494.5	-	-
18	225	I&M Group	Regional Banks	Kenya	276.8	413.7	-	-
19	-	British Amer. Tobacco Kenya PLC	Tobacco	Kenya	314.6	287.1	-	-
20	-	Tanzania Portland Cement Ltd	Construction Materials	Tanzania	301.9	270.6	-	-

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Southern Africa

South African companies outdo domestic economy

As noted in the overview, South African companies continue to dominate our table of the Top 250 African Companies despite the country's weak economic growth over many years. South Africa's growth outlook has been further tempered by the threat of US tariffs. US President Donald Trump initially unveiled a 30% tariff on South African goods imported into the US, but that has been replaced with the 10% universal tariff levied on all countries pending a 90-day review.

However, relations with the US have gone from bad to worse in recent months. Secretary of state Marco Rubio refused to attend a G20 foreign ministers meeting in Johannesburg; South African ambassador to Washington DC Ebrahim Rasool was expelled; and Trump has continued to assail Pretoria over its limited plans for land reform. While South Africa has appointed the respected Mcebisi Jonas as special envoy to smooth over relations, the direction of

travel – combined with the likelihood that Trump will not revive the soon-to-be-expired tariff-free African Growth and Opportunity Act that Pretoria has long-enjoyed access to – means that South African companies are not likely to receive a warm welcome in the US anytime soon.

The 20 biggest South African companies are also ranked in the continental Top 30, with 16 of them among the continent's 18 biggest listed companies. There are some signs of recovery in South African corporate values this year as the country's government of national unity (GNU) bids to improve the economy. Many successful South African companies are also exposed to multiple African markets.

We have produced separate tables for Southern Africa including and excluding South Africa, because the Top 20 companies in the region are all South African. A separate table allows us to consider companies based in the rest of the region (see page 41).

The threshold for inclusion in our South African table has increased from the \$4.9bn valuation of Sasol in our 2024 table to \$5.1bn for Pepkor Holdings in this year's rankings, suggesting some recovery in the country's strength in corporate depth. This is underlined by the total value of the South African companies listed in our Top 250 increasing from \$304bn to \$358bn over the past year, although they have not quite recovered to the \$375.4bn recorded in 2023.

The biggest South African companies come from many different industries, including banking, insurance, mining, telecoms, internet and software services, retail, restaurants and investment management. Morocco is the only other African country with as wide range of big companies. While both Morocco and South Africa have large raw materials sectors, both use their natural resources to benefit their wider economies. ■

South African companies dominate Africa's Top 250, despite slow growth, US tensions, and trade uncertainty

Region	Rank	Company name	Sector	Stock exchange	Market value 31/03/24 \$m	Market value 31/03/25 \$m	Net income latest \$m	Revenue latest \$m
1	1	Naspers	Internet Soft./Services	S Africa	31,933.9	40,392.8	2,863.0	6,400.0
2	2	FirstRand	Major Banks	S Africa	18,286.3	21,911.0	2,126.9	7,781.2
3	3	Standard Bank Group	Regional Banks	S Africa	16,392.9	21,594.4	2,387.7	9,923.1
4	4	Gold Fields	Precious Metals	S Africa	14,363.9	19,729.4	1,245.0	5,202.0
5	5	Capitec Bank	Regional Banks	S Africa	12,849.5	19,585.7	552.3	1,881.9
6	6	Anglogold Ashanti	Precious Metals	S Africa	9,318.0	18,690.5	-	5,793.0
7	8	Vodacom Group	Wireless Telecom	S Africa	10,813.7	14,172.8	891.8	8,225.8
8	9	MTN Group	Wireless Telecom	S Africa	9,327.7	12,625.0	-530.5	10,396.9
9	11	Anglo American Platinum	Other Metals/Minerals	S Africa	10,766.4	10,592.9	382.7	5,909.2
10	12	Sanlam	Property/Casualty Ins.	S Africa	8,072.4	9,525.6	1,368.3	1,289.6
11	13	Harmony Gold Mining	Precious Metals	S Africa	5,173.3	9,197.5	484.5	3,463.1
12	14	Shoprite	Food Retail	S Africa	7,727.0	8,768.2	347.3	13,677.4
13	15	Absa Group	Major Banks	S Africa	6,996.3	8,606.8	1,183.8	6,043.2
14	16	Bid Corporation	Restaurants	S Africa	8,179.7	8,049.9	452.6	12,687.7
15	18	Discovery	Life/Health Insurance	S Africa	4,308.7	7,372.6	416.8	3,055.4
16	19	Nedbank Group	Regional Banks	S Africa	5,894.3	6,823.1	905.8	3,956.7
17	20	Impala Platinum	Other Metals/Minerals	S Africa	3,740.0	6,191.8	-975.2	4,866.5
18	23	OUTsurance Group	Multi-Line Insurance	S Africa	3,401.0	5,860.4	226.4	1,513.1
19	27	Kumba Iron Ore	Steel	S Africa	7,862.7	5,464.7	798.5	3,722.6
20	29	Pepkor	Apparel/Footwear Retail	S Africa	3,671.8	5,126.2	113.9	4,678.4

The rest of Southern Africa

Southern Africa:
the rise of Malawi

Our table of the 20 biggest listed companies in Southern Africa includes companies from across the region, including seven from Malawi, four from Namibia, four from Zimbabwe, three from Mauritius and one each from Botswana and Zambia. The big change here over the past year has been that Malawi and Zimbabwe have gained three and two positions respectively.

In particular, the four Malawian banks that were ranked between 10th and 14th last year are now listed between 4th and 8th. FMB Capital Holdings is now the biggest Malawian bank, moving up from 13th to 4th on the back of a massive increase in market capitalisation from \$539m to \$1,963m. It has overtaken National Bank of Malawi (NBM), despite that bank's increase from \$646m to \$1,669m.

NBM announced a 42% increase in lending for the year to June 2024, a 30% rise in customer deposits and a 19% rise in post-tax profits to 41.1bn kwacha (\$2.4m). It is growing across the retail, business, investment banking and wealth management sectors but the one downside was a K2.6bn (\$1.49m) loss for its subsidiary, Akiba Commercial Bank, based in Tanzania. In September it concluded a \$100m trade agreement deal with Afreximbank, the biggest trade finance agreement ever in Malawi, to support trade

deals by Malawian companies, as NBM becomes increasingly active across the rest of Southern Africa.

Malawi's First Discount House (FDH) bank was not even included in our Southern African regional Top 20 last year but has moved up from 243rd to 98th in the continental Top 250 as a result of a huge increase in value from \$259m to \$1,254m. It too secured support from Afreximbank last year, in the form of a \$15m amortising term loan facility to support traders and manufacturers in the country.

FDH recorded a 55% increase in post-tax profits in the year to June 2024 to K35.6bn (\$20.3m) despite investing heavily in a range of digital platforms and staff training. Growth rates on these levels would have to be sustained for the Malawian banking sector to maintain its position in our regional Southern African table next year.

The biggest company in the region is Namibia's B2Gold Corporation, which has benefited from the rise in international gold prices over the past year. Its market value has increased from \$3,485m to \$3,750m over the past year, although this is still down on its 2020 figure of \$4,856m.

Aside from the rise of Malawian banks, the most remarkable development in our regional table this year is the \$514m that Mauritius's IBL Ltd needed to secure the final position in our rankings, up from the \$369m that Zambia National Commercial Bank recorded in the same spot last year and indeed none of the market capitalisations of the final six companies in our Southern Africa table last year would have been sufficient to achieve a ranking this year. ■

Malawian banks surged in Southern Africa's Top 20, FMB Capital rising to 4th, driven by sharp market value growth

Region	Rank	Company name	Sector	Stock exchange	Market value 31/03/24 \$m	Market value 31/03/25 \$m	Net income latest \$m	Revenue latest \$m
1	40	B2Gold	Other Metals/Minerals	Namibia	3,418.3	3,750.3		1,902.0
2	53	MCB Group	Major Banks	Mauritius	2,022.5	2,696.9	349.2	-
3	56	Truworths	Apparel/Footwear Retail	Zimbabwe	3.2	2,582.9	-	-
4	64	FMB Capital	Regional Banks	Malawi	538.8	1,963.2	-	-
5	76	National Bank of Malawi	Major Banks	Malawi	646.3	1,669.9	-	-
6	78	GetBucks Microfinance Bank	Finance/Rental/Leasing	Zimbabwe	2.0	1,651.3	-	-
7	98	FDH Bank	Major Banks	Malawi	259.0	1,254.7	-	-
8	111	Standard Bank Malawi	Invest.Banks/Brokers	Malawi	534.6	1,074.9	-	-
9	120	First Nat. Bank of Botswana	Major Banks	Botswana	861.0	950.0	-	-
10	136	Airtel Malawi	Wireless Telecom	Malawi	317.7	813.7	-	-
11	139	Copperbelt Energy Corp.	Electric Utilities	Zambia	510.0	791.6	-	-
12	151	Delta Corporation	Beverages: Alcoholic	Zimbabwe	0.4	743.7	100.5	767.9
13	152	Illovo Sugar (Malawi)	Agricultural Com.	Malawi	555.5	737.3	-	-
14	160	FirstRand Namibia	Major Banks	Namibia	699.2	682.5	98.3	-
15	162	Crytel Mauritius	Wholesale Distributors	Mauritius	664.5	664.5	-	-
16	167	Deep Yellow	Other Metals/Minerals	Namibia	766.3	642.4		
17	173	Padenga	Precious Metals	Zimbabwe	0.8	624.8	-	-
18	179	Capricorn Group	Regional Banks	Namibia	482.0	599.2	98.0	-
19	182	NBS Bank	Regional Banks	Malawi	184.5	584.2	-	-
20	198	IBL	Ind. Conglomerates	Mauritius	637.4	514.3	-	-

The Djibouti Forum 2025, the second international investment gathering hosted by the East African country, was an unqualified success. An initiative of the Djibouti Sovereign Wealth Fund, the two-day event (from 6 to 8 April) was held at the Ayla International Hotel in Djibouti.

The Djibouti Forum 2025 – an unqualified success



Under the theme “Unlocking Opportunities for Regional and Global Growth”, the Djibouti Forum 2025 hosted over 50 speakers and more than 150 international guests from 51 countries. This included major institutional investors overseeing more than \$2.6 trillion in cumulative assets, as well as the international media. We are pleased to present highlights from the Forum.

Opening addresses

In his address at the opening ceremony of the 2nd Djibouti Forum, Prime Minister Abdoukader Kamil Mohamed emphasized the political stability of the country, saying it had established credentials as a reliable partner in promoting diplomacy, peace and security in a region long steeped in crisis.

“Today, there’s no denying that we live

‘Djibouti’s growth prospects are in the order of 7% per annum for the next three years... we can... aim for what others call magical growth: 10%’

in a rapidly changing world, where yesterday’s certainties are no longer guaranteed, and where many countries are turning in on themselves.

“In Djibouti, we are proud of our stability and our ability to adapt to change.

“We are aware of the imperative of greater autonomy for the African continent. Djibouti’s chairmanship of the African Union Commission would undoubtedly bring a new dynamic to the continent.

“In today’s fractured world, where multilateralism is weakened and many countries are turning in on themselves, we Africans must become more self-reliant.

“This does not mean isolation. It means building internal resilience through regional cooperation, through initiatives such as the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), and through strategic partnerships based on equity and common interest,” he remarked.

"This forum is not just an opportunity to showcase our country. It's a platform to think boldly about Africa's future and the partnerships we need to forge to make it happen."

Dr Slim Feriani, CEO, Sovereign Wealth Fund of Djibouti: "If we are here, it's thanks to the vision of President Alhaji Ismail Omar Guelleh, a remarkable man, a visionary leader, a strategist of integrity and generosity – and, dare we say it, a type of leadership that the world sorely needs today.

"Today we are faced with an inescapable reality. The world is changing. At a time when the US is announcing an almost total dismantling of its foreign aid and its

'This forum is not just an opportunity to showcase our country. It's a platform to think boldly about Africa's future and the partnerships we need to forge to make it happen'

"There is still a long way to go from a broader pan-African perspective, including the urgent need for our large economic engines to start humming again," he said, citing South Africa, Nigeria and Morocco.

He acknowledged that shifts in the global order, driven by a reduction in Western aid and the tariff wars introduced by the US, pose significant risks to Africa.

Nevertheless, he argued that the negative impacts of these developments will largely be felt in the short term, and that the situation "provides an opportunity for Africa to own and control its development". Leke highlighted the resilience of



European counterparts are reallocating funds to overseas development, it's time to react.

"This is why the Fonds Souverain de Djibouti is such an important instrument. We want to be an essential tool for directing investment towards the productive sectors of our continental economy, and we already are.

"We are here because we believe in the transformation of our continent. We are here to build lasting partnerships and to move forward together by catalysing investment.

"Djibouti's growth prospects are in the order of 7% per annum for the next three years. We know that, with the right partners and the right investments, we can – and I say this with conviction but humility – aim for what others call magical growth: 10%.

"Our ports and logistics are world-class. And we have the structures in place to

create a manufacturing and digital hub and take advantage of our strategic location in the middle of 400 million young consumers. The similarities I see, from an investor's point of view, with other high-growth emerging markets of the past, such as Malaysia, Vietnam and Mexico, are obvious."

Dr Acha Leke, Senior Partner and Chairman of McKinsey & Company Africa, said there are encouraging signs of an early recovery led by smaller African countries, citing the examples of Cabo Verde, Rwanda, and Libya, each of which registered a compounded annual growth rate of 9% in GDP from 2020 to 2023.

That said, he cautioned that some countries are yet to emerge from the doldrums. "The truth remains that there is no 'one Africa'. Disparities in economic growth persist as countries experience divergent development paths," he said.

Africa's private sector as a major strength. "Despite all its challenges, the private sector is resilient. Africa is home to about 345 African business champions worth more than \$1 billion, with cumulative revenues of around \$1 trillion."

Strategic partnerships

A common thread throughout the discussions at the Djibouti Forum was the need for greater strategic partnerships and collaborations to unlock investment potential.

Dr Slim Feriani said: "The magic word is partnership. That is the one that unites us."

Lionel Zinsou, former Prime Minister of Benin and co-founder of SouthBridge, said "There is a new important partner in blended finance, which is the partnership of the public and private sectors with philanthropy.

"They are prepared to de-risk investments and to supply grants, which helps

lower the costs and interest rates for projects," he said.

Solomon Quaynor, AfDB VP for Private Sector, Infrastructure and Industrialisation, said, "With limited fiscal space, we are seeing greater pressure and urgency to do public-private partnerships but it will take time. African sovereign wealth funds are the next generation of risk mitigation tools for public private partnerships. They are commercially run, well governed, understand the private sector and understand government strategic priorities."

George Olaka, Chief Financial Officer, ARISE IIP and ARISE IS, said: "The Trump tariffs will be a problem for us in the short term, but it is in the resilience we bring that we will circumvent some of the impacts of this tariff war."

Hassan Jaber, CEO, AXIAN Telecom, said that the private sector brings the

'African sovereign wealth funds are the next generation of risk mitigation tools for public private partnerships. They are commercially run, well governed and understand the private sector'

place for us to come to in Africa," he said. "The potential that we see in Djibouti's youth is undeniable. They have an appetite for and competence in the digital economy."

Lacina Kone, Director General and CEO of Smart Africa, argued that "the cost of data in Africa remains excessively high, with prices ranging from a low of 38 US cents per gigabyte in Malawi to a staggering \$43 per gigabyte in Zimbabwe. These inflated charges are largely due to excessive taxes, and it's imperative for governments to reassess this situation."

Michelle Chivunga, founder and CEO of Global Policy House, said before Africa can seize the opportunity presented by emerging technologies such as blockchain or AI, the public sector must prioritise digitisation of its own processes.

"Most of the data sitting in governments is not digitised," she observed. "We need to



knowhow and the capital and can bring credible partners in, and the government must focus on putting in place the right guidelines.

Growth of Africa's digital economy

Djibouti is poised to become a digital hub linking Europe, Asia, Africa and the Middle East, with 10 undersea cables running through its territory – more than any other country in sub-Saharan Africa.

In the Digital Transformation of Africa panel discussion, speakers highlighted the country's competitive advantage in the sector and the significant opportunity this presents for transforming the economy of the nation.

Mariam Hamadou Ali, Djibouti's Minister Delegate for the Digital Economy and Innovation, said the country has a comparative advantage due to major investments in network infrastructure, including the undersea cables.

The country has also signed partnerships with international companies such as PAIX Data Centres to build carrier-neutral data centres.

Ali said that with the enabling infrastructure now in place, Djibouti was currently focused on attracting increased private investment to the digital economy. "We have identified investment needs in the digital economy totalling \$850m and expect the private sector to provide up to 70% of this investment," she said.

Yann Jaffre, Associate Director, Tactics, said, "Djibouti's investments in digital infrastructure, including submarine cables and data centres, have the potential to transform the nation into a digital connectivity hub, comparable to Marseille in France."

Prince Moukoubouka, CEO Groupe Cegelem, welcomed Djibouti's move to upskill the youth "With the road map that has been developed, Djibouti was the best

build our 'data capital' to be competitive."

Aboubakar Haman, Group Chief Corporate Affairs Officer at AXIAN Telecom, said "Quality of service must remain a priority, even as we strive to expand coverage. We need to create an unforgettable client experience."

Yonas Maru, Managing Director Bandwidth and Cloud Services (BCS) Group, "We first became a customer of Djibouti Telecom in 2012. We are now working with them on a low latency link cutting through Ethiopia to Nairobi in Kenya via high voltage electricity lines."

Spotlighting Africa's Energy

Djibouti currently generates approximately 80% of its energy from renewable sources, thanks mainly to its interconnection with Ethiopia and the launch of a 60 MW wind farm in 2023. It aims to fully transition to 100% renewable energy, reduce dependency on external sources, and enhance its

industrial appeal, according to Yonis Ali Guedi, the Minister of Energy and Natural Resources during a panel discussion on the energy mix in Africa.

He pointed to the ongoing development of the Grand Bara solar power project, which features a 25 MW power plant complemented by 10 MW of battery storage."

The country's location on the Great Rift Valley offers a unique opportunity to develop geothermal energy – a point that fellow panellist Phil Harms, President 4th Resource Group, concurred: "Geothermal is primarily driven by geology. There is a huge opportunity in East Africa because it sits at the junction of three tectonic plates spreading apart and releasing heat from the core of the earth," Harms said. "Djibouti exists at the triple junction of these tectonic plates, making it ideal for geothermal energy."

a country to partner with, we look at what is available and advocate for using what they have," he said.

Aminu Umar-Sadiq, Managing Director and CEO of the Nigeria Sovereign Investment Authority (NSIA), noted that many projects failed to reach financial close due to how they were structured in the early project preparation phase. "We're focused on project preparation to ensure that we have bankable projects in the renewable energy sector with the ability to scale," he said.

"We're exploring blended finance and have provided a significant amount of first-loss funding that will catalyse conservative capital," he said.

Investor perspectives

Global investors were in evidence throughout the Djibouti Forum.

Ahmed Osman Ali, Central Bank Gover-

nor, Djibouti, said the country was focusing on what financial instruments were needed to attract people to invest in Djibouti and draw capital

The country has 13 banks and banking reform efforts are focused on supporting the investment drive, particularly modernising financial infrastructure through digitisation and development of financial tools. There is also a shift to Islamic banking by some institutions.

Bahruz Bahramov, Deputy CEO, State Oil Fund of the Republic of Azerbaijan, said his country's \$636bn fund was mostly active in private equity and real estate. Africa had come onto its radar. "Our first investment in Africa was through the IFC, mostly in the financial industry and communications. As a long-term investment, we see the region is evolving and we need to tap in and invest more. We are here to learn."

Aminu Umar-Sadiq, MD and CEO of



Helen Robinson, Global R&D manager at the International Geothermal Association, noted that geothermal's ability to provide a stable baseload made it ideal for sustainable industrialisation.

She added that in nations where geothermal resources have been developed, the sector has demonstrated greater effectiveness in job creation during the development process compared to other energy sources.

Lindsay Nagle, Founder and CEO of Infinitum Energy, argued that by harnessing waste as a resource, communities can reduce landfill use, lower carbon emissions, and transition towards a circular economy.

Ryan Collyer, CEO of Rosatom Central and Southern Africa, noted that the Russian state-owned nuclear corporation was actively scouting for opportunities in Africa where the potential for nuclear power was still largely untapped. "When we evaluate

'In the current environment, we have to change our mind-set to be open to the world, find solutions to the problems and fix them. But in doing so we also have to point to some of our own problems'

the Nigeria Sovereign Investment Authority, said NSIA's main source of funding is surplus income generated from the sale of Nigeria's crude oil, with an initial allocation of \$1bn.

Rene Awambeng, founder and Managing Partner, Premier Invest, shared his positive experience of investing in Djibouti. "Investors are concerned about currency stability in Africa but if there is a place to avoid this risk it is Djibouti," he said, adding that the political and economic stability is also a drawcard.

"It is very cheap, there are guaranteed investment returns and freedom of financial movement."

New trade corridors

In a panel discussion on new trade corridors, Paulo Gomes, founder of Orango Investment Corporation and co-founder of New Capital African Partners, said "In the

current environment, we have to change our mind-set to be open to the world, find solutions to the problems and fix them. But in doing so we also have to point to some of our own problems and our attitudes."

He suggested that trade corridors and special economic zones, are trying to fix a problem of fragmentation, "but the corridors give us a way to accelerate regional integration and find a way to move goods and for capital to grow."

Cheick-Oumar Sylla, Director for North Africa and Horn of Africa, IFC, concurred. "Talking about the Lobito Corridor, it is important that you don't only focus on critical minerals. You need to look at bigger opportunities and what makes the project sustainable."

Rural development was raised as key underpinning of development but is not always recognised as such. Dr Ashraf Iqbal, Chairman of Waafi Bank in Malaysia, reminded delegates that at the time

'Ports are the gateways to Africa and efficiency is very important but if the rest of the infrastructure is not as efficient, we are just moving the problem up the corridor'

with global trade of about €8 billion set to double. The changing patterns mean consumers and suppliers are demanding more globalisation of logistics.

"The complexity of logistics is changing as well; new requirements mean having a position on the ocean is not the end of logistics; we need a presence on the land as well."

Reda Moukhli, CEO of Marsa Maroc International Logistics, spoke about the great strides Morocco has made with its Tanger-Med port. Morocco manages 25 terminals across 11 ports, including Africa's biggest port, Tanger-Med, which was established in the early 2000s as a greenfield project.

He said the port sector is a huge growth opportunity for Djibouti, given its strategic location. "It is unique. It is very important to make it a hub and you now have to scale on this hub and develop other things to



Ghana gained its independence in 1957, its economy was 20 times the size of the Malaysia's. "Why are the outcomes so different many years later?" he asked.

"We solved the issues in rural areas before focusing on urban spaces. It made a difference as it stopped urban migration," he said.

Africa's competitiveness is affected by fragmentation of efforts, said Samba Bathily, CEO of ADS Group. "If we make sure that every country plays to its competitive advantage, we could do something. The continent could be more competitive."

Djibouti's ports and logistics

Abdi Adawe Sigad, CEO, Société de Gestion du Terminal à Conteneurs de Doraleh, said investment is needed in infrastructure along the Djibouti-Ethiopia corridor to bring down the costs of trade.

Only 10% of cargo coming into ports in

Djibouti are for the country itself, with 90% destined for Ethiopia. Investment in road infrastructure would also enable greater regional penetration, extending trade from Djibouti port to other countries such as South Sudan and Uganda.

Djibouti remains one of the best performing ports in Africa, with volume growth doubling in the past few years. It is the only port in East Africa that can operate any size of container vessel. The country's Ship Repair Yard is the only facility of its kind in the region and the country has six different ports and terminals, enhancing its competitiveness.

Jason Reynard, Regional Managing Director of Africa Global Logistics, said "Ports are the gateways to Africa and efficiency is very important but if the rest of the infrastructure is not as efficient, we are just moving the problem up the corridor."

He said global trends are changing

benefit from regional integration."

Mbahupu Tjivikua, CEO of the Walvis Bay Corridor Group, said his company works with immigration and customs, port users, freight forwarders, shipping lines, and transport authorities to build competitiveness and address challenges.

He noted that customs officials and processes need change. "You find that customs officials have been doing things the same way for 25 years and have become used to it and there is no business process engineering happening,"

Tourism: where the continents connect

Tourism is not just about natural attractions; it is about resource mapping and planning, about strong branding and marketing and about investment in infrastructure and services. These were some of the ideas raised at a session on Urban

Fireside chats

Development, Tourism & Hospitality,

Djibouti's Minister of City, Urban Planning and Housing, Amina Abdi Aden, said her team had visited Singapore to see what could be borrowed from the city-state's model for Djibouti's 10-year development master plan.

This includes making it more competitive, more resilient to climate change and other challenges and more inclusive.

Tourism products are important, she said, and Djibouti is not short of natural attractions such as its coastal areas, lakes and islands but also historical sites and a range of hotels in the capital city itself. Land belongs to the state and can be made available to the private sector for development.

Lensa (Aida) Mekonnen, former State Minister to Ethiopian Ministry of Tourism and former CEO of FDRE Land Bank and Development Corporation, said: "In Af-



rica, we think of tourism as leisure and we don't consider it to be a key economic pillar, which has affected how we utilise the sector."

She offered advice to Djibouti based on her experience of selling Ethiopia's tourism sector. "You need to really know and map your resources. This helps you to know your competitive advantage and it helps you to turn your resources into products in your masterplan."

Thierno-Habib Hann, CEO and Managing Director of Shelter Afrique said the continent's cities tend to be characterised by slums due to poor development planning, influx of people and lack of innovation in urban models.

"We also need to build back our cities better. It means we must fix our city centres. Land is scarce and infrastructure is not adequate. We need to use better what we already have."

HASSANEIN HIRIDJEE – Group CEO, AXIAN: "Africa is diverse. You need to understand the specifications of every single market, the needs of the market and the government's national development plan. Once you understand the authorities' plan of action, then you can collaborate and sustain public dialogue."

FATIMA ELSHEIKH – Secretary General, BADEA: "BADEA's mandate is anchored in solidarity between the Arab world and Africa, is to build bridges of development and opportunity. Over the years, we have evolved from a traditional concessional lender to a dynamic partner in blended finance, private sector development, and regional integration."

LACINA KONE – CEO, Smart Africa: "Only 46% of our population in Africa is connected today and there is a 50% usage gap. That means that 50% of the population that has access are not using ICT. This is largely because of affordability."

"The regulatory environment in ICT makes the difference between Singapore and Cameroon or between Dubai and Nigeria. You don't wait for your future you make it."

ADMASU TADESSE – President and MD, Eastern and Southern African Trade and Development Bank (TDB): "While demand for capital on the continent is growing at a brisk pace, supply is struggling to keep pace. This mismatch underlines the need for African financiers to bridge the gap and allocate more of their resources to Africa's transformation."

"African development finance institutions, banks and capital markets must all come together to multiply the power of African capital."

MIGUEL AZEVEDO – Head of Investment Banking, Middle East & Africa (exc. SA), Citi: noted that it is likely to be a "difficult year" for Africa. Nevertheless, Azevedo said that there were a couple of bright spots in Africa. One of them is mining and critical minerals. The other is Nigeria which appears to be on the mend and is drawing increased interest from dealmakers from Africa and beyond.

TIDJANE THIAM – Executive Chairman, Freedom Acquisition Corp: "Our pension funds are underdeveloped. We have a young population, so the time is right to grow our pension industry and fund projects in local currency – without the currency mismatch risk we often see with externally funded projects."

Finding opportunity in crisis

The ongoing global trade wars, instigated by the US's protectionist policies, have plunged the world deeper into a state of "perma-crisis", according to Carlos Lopes, professor at the Mandela School of Public Governance at the University of Cape Town.

"After the pandemic we had the war in Ukraine and the inflationary pressures that led to high food prices. Now we have trade wars."

"However, Africa's limited fiscal space makes it harder for it to respond," Lopes explained. "We have exhausted our resilience capacity."

To be sure, crises are not a novel phenomenon. "The US is using uncertainty as a bargaining mechanism. People don't know which policies will prevail or which will be reversed. There is a level of unpredictability that is dissimilar to



past shocks because the uncertainty is policy-induced."

He emphasised that Africa must not despair in these uncertain times but should instead seize the opportunity to build and grow its own continental market.

"The value of our pension fund assets and institutional capital is somewhere in the region of \$4 trillion. This is an opportunity for Africa to finance its own development," he said.

Dr Samuel Maimbo, former World Bank Vice President, described the pull-back in development aid as a "wake up call" for the continent.

"The conversation I would like to have in Africa is not about the tariffs being imposed by the US. Rather, the conversation should be about the 25%-35% that we impose on each other," he noted. ■

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SPECIAL REPORT INFRASTRUCTURE & FINANCE

Africa's infrastructure needs remain vast, with the African Development Bank estimating that between \$130bn and \$170bn is required for infrastructure development each year. With a tough global backdrop defined by trade tensions

and reduced forecasts for economic growth, that looks ever more challenging to achieve. In this special report we talk to those at the forefront of making the ambition of closing the continent's infrastructure gap a reality.



The Goubet Wind Power Station is a 60 MW energy project in Djibouti.

Philippe Valahu, CEO, Private Infrastructure Development Group (PIDG)

*Philippe Valahu says that untapped long-term opportunities in sectors such as energy will be attractive regardless of political decisions around aid. **Lennox Yieke** reports.*

Renewables will drive Africa's growth without aid

The decision by the US and other Western nations to curtail development aid represents a major setback for Africa. Numerous projects that heavily rely on foreign assistance in critical sectors such as education, healthcare, and infrastructure have been halted in the wake of these funding cuts, rendering thousands jobless and impeding much-needed development.

Adding to the strain is the fact that, under the Trump administration, the US is less inclined to support climate initiatives in Africa and around the world. While these events have fuelled widespread pessimism about Africa's development prospects, Philippe Valahu, CEO of Private Infrastructure Development Group (PIDG), tells *African Business* that he is "more optimistic than most". He concedes that there are "concerns about some of the headlines coming out of the US" but stresses that development on the continent "will continue in one shape or another."

Founded in 2002 as a multi-donor initiative, PIDG focuses on leveraging aid to mobilise private sector investment for critical infrastructure projects in developing nations. Between 2002 and 2023 the group allocated the majority of its financial commitments to energy (34%), followed by digital communications infrastructure (15%) and transportation (14%). During this period, the group successfully supported 233 projects to reach financial close.

"Over the years, we have mobilised over \$40bn for projects, of which \$26bn was from the private sector," Valahu says, noting that 70% of projects supported since inception have been in Africa and the balance in Asia.

He argues that the current debate on the implications of aid reduction on Africa is inordinately focused on the short-term risks instead of the untapped long-term opportunities in sectors such as energy.

"I know where the opportunity is: the energy sector, the 600m people in Africa without electricity."

Betting on renewables

"Demand for renewables – solar, hydro, wind, and other forms – that doesn't go away. The opportunity continues to be there," Valahu emphasises, revealing that PIDG took a strategic decision six years ago to focus on renewables, in line with its commitment to

climate action. He says that this decision paved the way for increased investments in the distributed renewable energy (DRE) space, where PIDG has emerged as a consequential developer on the continent. DRE refers to small-scale, localised energy solutions that operate independently of national grids and rely on renewable energy sources like solar, wind or hydro. DRE solutions are particularly effective in reaching remote areas that are poorly served by national electricity transmission and distribution infrastructure.

"Africa still obviously needs the large IPPs [independent power producers] and the large baseload power plants, but typically those are able to attract funding from the African Development Bank, the IFC, and large MDBs [multilateral development banks]," Valahu explains.

"These institutions have a lot of trouble and difficulty funding the smaller renewable energy projects within the distributed renewable energy space. Very often there is not a lot of risk appetite. When we were set up, it was deliberately to take risks and go to places that others were shying away from," he says.

"We're the second or third largest developer of distributed renewable energy solutions in Africa. It's been quite a journey over the past few years and one that we will continue to be very actively involved in."

Crowding in private investment

Valahu maintains that what sets PIDG apart is its ability to leverage every dollar of aid that it commits to a project to attract additional investments from the private sector. He attributes this to the group's multi-faceted efforts to de-risk infrastructure assets in Africa.

"We come in to develop a project and take it to financial close. We stay with it through construction, and then once the project is operational we can stay a couple of years.

"The ultimate aim is to show that a project is de-risked, that commercially it operates efficiently and therefore it is ripe to attract private investment," he expounds.

He cites a recent example from Malawi, where PIDG company InfraCo Africa agreed to sell its 25% stake in Golomoti JCM Solar Corporation to Old Mutual Infrastructure Investment Trust Fund (Malawi). The deal, announced in February and set to be final-



'Demand for renewables – solar, hydro, wind, and other forms – that doesn't go away. The opportunity continues to be there'

ised in August, involves a 20 MW solar plant with a 5 MW battery energy storage system (BESS).

Valahu notes that local currency guarantees are another key tool that PIDG uses to de-risk projects and mobilise private investment from domestic commercial banks.

"A few years back in Togo, we were looking at a large power project that had a significant local currency tranche. Domestic banks could only do five-year lending under the regulations in Togo. We provided a guarantee to the Togolese banks, allowing them to go ten years and participate in the financing of infrastructure assets in their own country."

PIDG also offers credit enhancement investments to help project sponsors issue domestic corporate bonds in local currency and tap into domestic institutional capital. This has achieved interesting results in Nigeria, Valahu points out.

"If you look a few years ago the [Nigerian] pension funds and insurance companies were not investing in infrastructure. Working with regulators, working with the Nigerian Sovereign Investments Authority, we helped change that so that they can invest in the infrastructure asset class."

Valahu stresses that PIDG's technical assistance, which totalled \$37m last year, is another unique offering that helps de-risk projects. "For a lot of our projects, post-construction we may make some technical assistance available to the company to enhance their health and safety skills. It could be training, it could be hiring an individual, it could be hosting a workshop with like minded health and safety specialists in a number of companies that we've invested in or developed."

Financial sustainability key

Looking forward, Valahu says that PIDG will remain focused on delivering development impact in a way that is financially sustainable. Delivering value for money to its owners – the UK, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Australia, Sweden, Germany and (most recently) Canada – is key to securing continued financial support.

"We have a good relationship with our members. We delivered last year the best year we ever had in 23 years. We've been able to demonstrate very strong results in infrastructure and impact on people and that gives confidence to our owners to continue funding," he said.

He says that PIDG will intensify efforts to diversify its funding sources, given recent moves by Western nations to slash international aid. "We've been able to bring private capital into the mix and there are discussions with philanthropies. If we fast forward five years, our capital sources will be considerably more diversified than in the past."

"A number of European countries have indicated either they're cutting back on aid or that future aid will be linked to national interests," Valahu says, noting that the broader pullback in Western aid to Africa raises pertinent political questions.

"The political question remains – and I'll leave that to the politicians – if certain parties move away from the aid space, then does it mean you are opening up for countries like China to come in?" ■

With Africa's infrastructure outpacing financing flows, **Abbas Husain**, head of the Global Infrastructure & Development Finance Group at Standard Chartered, shares how the bank is supporting long-term, sustainable infrastructure on the continent

Bridging Africa's infrastructure gap

Standard Chartered is a leader in infrastructure financing, having structured and financed vital infrastructure, power, utilities and energy transition projects for over two decades. With deep relationships with sponsors and governments and a track record across sectors including energy, transport and social infrastructure, the bank was recently recognised as the leading Infrastructure Bank in Africa and the Middle East by Project Finance International.

Africa is at a pivotal moment in its development. Robust infrastructure is essential for sustainable economic growth, long-term prosperity and transformation. Yet the continent faces a substantial financing gap. The African Development Bank estimates annual infrastructure needs at \$130bn to \$170bn, with a financing shortfall of \$68bn to \$108bn. Factors such as perceived investment risks, regulatory complexities and currency volatility continue to constrain access to long-term capital.

Expanding opportunities

Infrastructure finance in Africa presents both immense opportunities and significant challenges. Investment is growing across sectors such as power, minerals and metals, transport and logistics, oil and gas, water and sanitation and digital infrastructure – driven by population growth, urbanisation, energy needs and trade connectivity. Projects supported by Standard Chartered, including solar initiatives in Senegal and road infrastructure in Ghana, illustrate the scale and ambition behind this momentum.

Despite the complexities, international investment appetite remains strong, particularly from pension funds, insurers and private credit seeking stable long-term assets. There is growing focus on sustainability, with capital increasingly directed toward renewables, healthcare and other sectors contributing to inclusive development.

Several key trends are shaping infrastructure finance across the region. Countries are accelerating their clean energy commitments, leading to strong demand for renewables such as solar, wind, green hydrogen and carbon capture. At the same time, there is renewed focus on baseload thermal power, with a surge in combined-cycle gas turbine (CCGT) projects in the Middle East.

Battery energy storage systems are also on the rise, addressing peak shaving needs in energy systems reliant on intermittent renewables. Meanwhile, water scarcity is driving growth in desalination and wastewater treatment, with many projects structured as public-private partnerships (PPPs). Transport infrastructure – especially mega projects such as rail networks, airports and ports – is seeing increased focus, as is the digital space, where AI adoption is boosting demand for data centres.

Collaborative finance models

Africa's infrastructure needs cannot be met by either the public or private sector alone. PPPs and development finance institutions (DFIs) play a central role in bridging the gap. DFIs help de-risk projects by offering concessional financing, technical support and environmental and social safeguards – improving bankability and attracting private investment.

Standard Chartered has worked closely with DFIs and governments to finance PPP projects across Africa and the Middle East, providing financial advisory services, evaluating risks and unlocking diverse liquidity sources such as export credit agencies, infrastructure funds and sukuk or project bonds.

One notable example is the Emerging Africa Infrastructure Fund (EAIF), which recently secured a \$294m debt package for infrastructure projects across sub-Saharan Africa. In Angola, the bank helped facilitate a €1.29bn solar-powered electricity distribution programme to improve rural access

to clean energy. In Tanzania, a US\$1.46bn term loan for a 550km Standard Gauge Railway underscores how infrastructure can foster regional integration and reduce freight service costs by up to 40%.

Through partnerships with institutions like the Islamic Corporation for the Insurance of Investment and Export Credits (ICIEC) and UK Export Finance, the bank has also backed infrastructure projects in Senegal and Angola. Similar collaborations underpinned delivery of the Hafeet Rail and Abu Dhabi Waste-to-Energy projects in the UAE.

Sustainability and innovation

The shift towards sustainable finance and ESG investments is creating new opportunities for investors to align their portfolios with their values. Investors increasingly seek responsible investment opportunities – particularly in sectors like mining, where sustainable and ethical practices are becoming more appealing. Sustainability has evolved from a compliance obligation into a strategic priority and key driver of revenue.

Emerging regulatory requirements, such as ESG disclosure mandates for listed companies in the Gulf, are promoting transparency and investor confidence. Standard Chartered has adopted global frameworks like the Taskforce on Nature-related Financial Disclosures (TNFD), aligning with current and future demands for responsible business practices.

The sustainable finance market in Africa is gaining strong interest. The bank has supported several Sustainability Linked Loans, including a framework developed for Bapco Energies – making it the first national energy company to publish such a framework. In Ghana and Angola, social loans are financing clean water infrastructure and university expansion, demonstrating a focus on social as well as environmental outcomes.

The ESG debt capital markets in the Middle East are also expanding. Standard

A portrait of a middle-aged man with dark hair, smiling, wearing a dark blue suit, a light blue striped shirt, and a red patterned tie. The background is a plain, light grey.

By connecting capital to bankable projects and aligning finance with sustainability goals, we can bridge the infrastructure gap and catalyse sustainable development

Chartered was a Joint Green Structurer for the Public Investment Fund's \$3bn green bond issuance and played a key role in another bond of the same size. In Qatar, the bank supported the country's first Green Guarantee for a solar power project.

African countries are also adopting Just Energy Transition Investment Plans that prioritise renewable energy, job creation and community engagement. The bank has partnered with DFIs and multilateral lenders to implement blended finance structures that mobilise private capital by reducing risk. Flagship projects such as Morocco's Noor Ouarzazate Solar Complex, Kenya's Lake Turkana Wind Power Project and the Suez Wind Energy Project, were supported through these models.

Looking ahead

Innovative financing models are crucial in bridging Africa's infrastructure gap. Blended finance structures combining public and private capital are improving project viability, as seen in Morocco, Kenya and elsewhere. Sustainability-linked loans are gaining traction, aligning financing with ESG goals. For strategic projects – especially in renewables – there is a growing trend toward longer loan tenors, extending beyond 20 years.

Refinancing strategies are also evolving, with sponsors using short-term bank finance followed by bond market or ECA-backed refinancing – especially in the Middle East. Alternative financing pools, such as DFIs, ECAs, pension funds, insurers and asset managers are broadening access to capital.

Digitalisation is driving demand for new infrastructure solutions. Platforms like Solv, Standard Chartered's B2B digital marketplace in Kenya, are improving SME access to finance, reducing costs and transaction times. This kind of innovation ensures more inclusive participation across African economies.

The outlook for infrastructure finance in Africa is strong, driven by technological advancements, sustainability imperatives, and shifting capital dynamics. Continued focus on policy liberalisation, governance improvements and transparent investment channels is helping to unlock capital. Infrastructure assets remain attractive to investors looking for long-term, stable returns with measurable impact.

Standard Chartered is committed to being a key player in Africa's infrastructure journey. Our vision is to leverage our global network and local expertise to act as a super-connector. By connecting capital to bankable projects and aligning finance with sustainability goals, we can bridge the infrastructure gap, catalyse sustainable development and contribute to a brighter, prosperous future for the continent, powering Africa's progress one project at a time. ■

*The African Private Capital Association held its annual meeting in Lagos at the end of April and says that investors are excited about Nigeria. **Harry Clynch** reports.*

‘Sentiment much more positive’ on Nigeria, says investor group

The African Private Capital Association (AVCA) said that a significantly improved macro-economic environment in Nigeria is prompting stronger interest from international investors in the country as it approached its annual conference in Lagos in late April. “When we finished our conference in Johannesburg last year, we announced we were going to Lagos. Some were sceptical as, at that time, Nigeria did not appear to be doing particularly well and was not really attracting many deals,” says Abi Mustapha-Maduakor, CEO of the AVCA.

“Cut to the present and most people are absolutely excited. We have macro stability and the sentiment is much more positive. This is the right time to go into Nigeria.”

Turnaround in progress?

Nigeria has proved to be a challenging environment for investment over the last few years, notably because of the devaluation of the naira in the middle of 2023, when the currency was freely floated as part of President Bola Tinubu’s economic reforms.

Especially when combined with the severe shortages of foreign currency in the country, which made it tricky for investors to repatriate their profits, this made investing in Nigeria too risky a prospect for



most to consider. Indeed, foreign direct investment into Nigeria in the first quarter of 2024 stood at just \$119.2m – a 35.2% drop from the previous quarter.

However, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) predicts that Nigeria will grow by 3.2% this year, with the World Bank slightly more optimistic, forecasting 3.6% growth. Government officials are fuelling the optimism.

The global investment bank Goldman Sachs has predicted that the naira, thanks to tighter monetary policy and increased capital inflows, could strengthen to 1,200 naira to the dollar compared to its current level of around 1,600.

Inflation is still elevated at just over 23% but is forecast to continue coming down. Sub-Saharan Africa more widely is predicted to post stronger growth in 2025 while, in other markets such as Europe, growth is estimated to continue declining.

Mustapha-Maduakor notes that, as well as these macroeconomic trends, specific events have helped bolster investor sentiment towards the West African powerhouse.

The fintech company Moniepoint becoming a unicorn, with a valuation of \$1bn (see page 80), “really helped, as did Uber deciding to invest in Nigeria,” she says.

One of the challenges faced by investors in Nigeria, and Africa more widely, most of whom make investments in US dollars, is foreign exchange risk. As the naira devaluation of 2023 showed, dollar profits can be severely undermined by currency depreciation even if the investment is performing strongly in naira terms.

But Mustapha-Maduakor says that “if investors are able to deploy a local currency, that becomes less of an issue.”

“We have seen strides towards this in Nigeria. For instance, we saw that the Nigeria Infrastructure Debt Fund raised over 300bn naira (\$187m), all from domestic pension funds. Stanbic Bank also launched an infrastructure fund fully in local currency,” she says. “We are speaking to more managers who are raising dual vehicles: one in US dollars with their typical international LPs [limited partners], and a local currency fund as well.”

More infrastructure needed, says association

This increase in investor interest is, of course, welcome – but there are certain strategic areas where more investment is desperately needed, both in Nigeria and across the continent. At its conference AVCA was particularly keen to highlight the role private capital can play in filling Africa’s infrastructure gap. Between 2012 and 2023, \$47.3bn was deployed across 847 reported infrastructure deals – but the continent is still believed to face an annual shortfall of \$100bn, stifling its growth potential.

“On the hard infrastructure side, we are lacking in just the generic things you do not tend to think about, such as roads, ports and energy. Digital infrastructure,

such as fibre optic broadband, is also lacking, as well as other important ‘soft’ things such as education and health capacities.”

Mustapha-Maduakor suspects that the continent’s infrastructure gap stems from its dependence on exporting raw commodities.

“The focus on exporting minerals and commodities has a negative consequence in that African countries have tended to focus on deriving value from exporting raw materials, meaning they have not focused on industrialisation,” she tells *African Business*.

“When a country starts flipping its focus, you start realising that all this infrastructure is required to industrialise: you need roads to be able to transport your goods, you need ports to be able to export.”

Infrastructure funds take off

Given the huge demand, there is a growing number of funds that have been launched specifically targeting the space.

In December 2023 the Africa50 Infrastructure Acceleration Fund announced its first close of \$222.5m, with the African Development Bank (AfDB) and International Finance Corporation (IFC) joining 16 African institutional investors to invest in digital infrastructure, renewable energy, transportation and other projects across Africa.

In July 2024, the African Infrastructure Investment Fund 4 (AIIF4) secured commitments totalling \$954m to invest in digital infrastructure and energy transition projects in Africa. Earlier this

year, the Infrastructure Climate Resilient Fund (ICRF) was launched by private African pension funds and state-led funds, aiming to invest up to \$750m in sustainable infrastructure on the continent.

Mustapha-Maduakor says that the amount of capital being invested in African infrastructure has declined since its peak in 2020 – but adds that, with macro conditions improving, new funds are now emerging aimed at “capitalising on the potential returns available in African infrastructure”.

“2020 was the peak in terms of capital being invested in infrastructure. In Nigeria, we had \$300m invested in infrastructure projects in 2020 – that has decreased over the last three years. In 2023, we had about \$74m invested and last year was around the same amount,” she says.

“This is because we had a post-pandemic decline across all asset classes, and then other macro challenges like the war in Ukraine which contributed to non-Africa focused managers deploying less capital on the continent.”

However, the flurry of new funds that have been launched to invest in African infrastructure is raising optimism that this is now changing, in Nigeria and more widely.

“We’re coming back to Lagos. We haven’t been in Nigeria since 2014, so we’re very excited to showcase the country to our global delegates. We want to show the wide spectrum of opportunities that are available in Nigeria,” says Mustapha-Maduakor. ■



At its conference AVCA was particularly keen to highlight the role private capital can play in filling Africa’s infrastructure gap

Above: Foreign exchange hurdles hit foreign direct investment, but the growth outlook offers hope.

Opposite: Highway construction near Abidjan.

Linda Mabhena-Olagunju: founder of DLO Energy Resources Group

*Linda Mabhena-Olagunju once locked horns with Trump's Scottish golf course, but is now focused on green deals across Africa. Interview by **Chris Bishop**.*

The South African green investor who took on Trump – and won

Linda Mabhena-Olagunju is probably one of the few African investors, right now, who can crack a smile at the mention of Donald Trump. It is hard for Africa in the US president's strange new world of turmoil and tariffs, in which the continent is set to lose billions of dollars' worth of aid and support.

The reason? As a young lawyer, back in 2007, Mabhena-Olagunju locked horns with Trump's legal team in court and won.

Not a bad scalp for a woman who grew up by candlelight in her grandparents' village in South Africa's Eastern Cape.

Mabhena-Olagunju was studying for her master's degree in international and commercial law at the University of Aberdeen on the windy north-east coast of Scotland.

The city, once the centre of the British oil and gas industry, now has a claim to being a green city; it even has a bus fleet that runs on zero-emission hydrogen.

The young lawyer, then in her early 20s, joined the legal team of the municipality-backed Aberdeen Renewable Energy Group in its first attempt to turn the mighty winds of the rugged Scottish coast into green energy.

The wind farm raised the ire of Trump. He claimed the wind turbines would spoil the view from his Trump International Golf Links in Balmedie and went to court to fight them – and lost.

It was a court victory that not only earned Mabhena-Olagunju a set of spurs, but also helped Aberdeen cement its green credentials. More than a decade later, the windmills of the Aberdeen Offshore Wind Farm are still turning.

"That was my first wind farm that I worked on and part of my job was opposing Donald Trump. And here I am again... full circle," she says, 18 years on, with a wry smile.

"It's true, because we're sitting in a situation

now where we are back to square one in terms of questioning whether climate change is real. Can you imagine?"

Bringing green energy to South Africa

Outspoken and feisty she may be, but you won't see Mabhena-Olagunju in the society pages of magazines, nor the ubiquitous conferences. She wears her eminence lightly and is usually too busy working to give interviews. Even so, she was high profile enough to be recognised by Oprah Winfrey's Power List of 20 of the most powerful women in Africa, a nod to how she has been able to broker black economic empowerment (BEE) deals, which are designed to redress the economic imbalances of apartheid.

Now, at the age of 41, she is a veteran of the tough and frustrating green energy investment business in Africa, where it can take more than five years just to close a deal.

In the small Northern Cape farming town of De Aar – population 42,000 – a huge forest of creaking white metal stands as testament to her dealmaking.

Turbines blow in the wind on top of a hill overlooking the town as they generate vital electricity; their sweeping yet strangely quiet blades have an 86-metre diameter.

These blades stand and serve alongside two solar photovoltaic (PV) farms generating 244 MW for the country's hard-pressed power grid.

They took years of hard work culminating in a deal put together by Mabhena-Olagunju under BEE legislation. The De Aar windmill deal was struck between China Longyuan Power Group, a subsidiary of the state-owned China Energy Investment, the biggest wind power builder in Asia; renewable energy developer Mulilo; and Mabhena-Olagunju's own DLO Energy Resources.

From talks to turning turbines, it took about four years of negotiations and a year of document signing. The legal fees, alone, were estimated at more than a million dollars. There was a mountain of forms, not

'No one is coming to save Africa. We are our only hope. We need to snap out of this delusion that some big brother from the West is going to save us'



Linda Mabhena-Olagunju: founder of DLO Energy Resources Group Limited

only for compliance for the empowerment deal, but also environmental permits and tax returns.

The risk is high in 20-year projects and anything can go wrong: the wind can drop; the sun can go behind the clouds too often; the government can change; investors can drop out; and the rules can change overnight.

If all goes well, a wind farm can be built in about 20 months, but that is just the beginning of recouping your money.

"Then you start seeing a trickle dividend. A trickle dividend at connection in the first seven years is very minimal. It's nothing to write home about. It's not even enough to pay your operational expenses," she says.

"The returns have been impacted because of competitive price bidding. Over the years the tariffs have gotten lower and that has meant less returns, especially if you are servicing debt, as we are with black economic empowerment. We have to service a huge amount of debt," she says.

"Over the years, the tariffs have come down, but you still need to service your lenders – and remember what has happened in the past couple of years – your interest rates have gone up, you're paying more interest. Then your project is not making enough of a return for you to service your debt and have a trickle dividend to pay yourself."

The South African government announced the results of its latest auction for independent power producers at the end of December – and the news made for grim reading for the wind industry. While the government awarded "preferred bidder" status to eight solar projects, with a combined capacity of 1,760 MW, it demurred on selecting any new wind power capacity.

The limitations of BEE

The change to green energy is thus going to take a long time. And while BEE has helped Mabhena-Olagunju to get a foothold in the green industry, she says there are still limitations to the country's empowerment framework.

De Aar may have windmills, but no one there can service or fix them.

"If there's a fault on the wind farm, there aren't electricians in the area that know how to deal with some of these things. How is that possible in a town like De Aar where it is the epicentre of renewable energy in the country?" she asks.

"The current stats from IRENA [the International Renewable Energy Agency] say 85 million jobs are going to be created globally from renewable energy, but only 30% of the people can actually take up those jobs, or have the requisite skill set to take up those jobs. What happens to the balance of 70%? And in a country like South Africa, where our unemployment is 32% plus? People don't have four years to sit back and do a degree, or have the money to even do that,

right?" Seeing a gap in training for black workers, Mabhena-Olagunju has backed an ed-tech startup to help South Africans get into green energy projects.

"We then created short courses, which we offer in-person and online, and also utilise AI so that people can have self-paced learning. It's an ed-tech start-up that's focused on the just energy transition and upskilling people. To date, we have trained 2,500 people."

Branching out into Africa

In terms of investment, Mabhena-Olagunju is focused firmly on the rest of the continent from her Johannesburg base. She also has a home in Nigeria, the land of her husband.

The next big project is underway in Zambia – building an onsite power plant for a copper mine.

"Zambia has been grievously impacted by climate change. A year or two ago, they had severe droughts and most of Zambia's power was coming from hydroelectric power stations. And as those water supplies dried up, they started having a sharp issue with electricity. Zambia is now on the scramble, especially in the northern region, where most of the mines are massively trying to procure [power]," she says.

"But the big issue in Zambia, as with any African state, and as with any global state, the issue is grid infrastructure... there is a lack of transmission lines to basically transmit that power from point A to point B."

Mabhena-Olagunju believes grid infrastructure is the next big thing for investors in the power game in Africa. She also looks at the Zambian project with a swell of pride.

"It's an African consortium, a wholly African consortium. It's a collaboration between South Africans, Nigerians and Zambians.

"A wholly black development where Africans are finally developing their own projects from start to finish."

Which brings us back to Donald Trump. In particular, his cold shoulder towards aid and investment in Africa.

"The truth is, in a way it presents an opportunity for Africa. I say this with links to the projects I am involved with

now. We are going to need to start thinking inwards and stop with this attitude of always wanting to be saved. No one is coming to save Africa. We are our only hope. We need to snap out of this delusion that some big brother from the West is going to save us," she says.

"Why are we in a position where we are heavily reliant on external third parties to own and produce the technology, which is going to power our countries? When are we going to finally wake up and say enough, we'll do it ourselves... I want to take the positive out of this and say it's an opportunity to get our act together." ■



'A trickle dividend at connection in the first seven years is very minimal. It's nothing to write home about. It's not even enough to pay your operational expenses'



Last year the African Development Bank (AfDB) released a report analysing Africa's "trade finance gap". This refers to the financial tools, such as letters of credit or guarantees, which businesses need to conduct cross-border trade – but which companies in Africa often struggle to access.

Trade finance is essential – both for small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and larger companies – to reduce the risks associated with international trade, improve cash flow and ensure that imports and exports are conducted in a smooth way. According to the AfDB, around 80% of all international trade globally depends on some form of trade financing.

However, there is a massive shortfall – a shortfall which stifles companies' ability to trade and therefore, in turn, dents economic growth. In 2022, the global trade finance gap stood at \$2.5 trillion – an increase of 47% from 2020. In Africa alone, the deficit was over \$80bn in 2019.

*A massive shortfall in trade finance stifles companies' ability to trade and dents economic growth. **Harry Clynych** looks at a new initiative attempting to change this.*

Teetering tariff trouble

There are reasons to suspect the trade finance gap could grow even larger on the continent. This is as a consequence of US President Donald Trump's decision to impose a universal 10% tariff on almost all countries, and the potential that he will reimpose higher "reciprocal" tariffs on African countries with which he claims the United States has a large trade deficit, following a 90-day pause.

Trade restrictions mean African countries are likely to export fewer goods to the US, which would lead to less hard foreign currency coming into African economies.

As a result, the US dollar liquidity which is required to facilitate trade finance would be diminished – further limiting banks' ability to provide the products and services businesses need to conduct trade successfully.

It is in this context that the UK's development finance institution, British International Investment (BII), has partnered with Ghana International Bank (GHIB) in a bid to start plugging the trade finance gap in seven African frontier markets.

BII and GHIB recently announced a \$50m trade finance facility that will expand access to credit for SMEs in Sierra Leone, Liberia, The Gambia, Benin, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda, and Tanzania. The initiative aims to ensure that businesses

Closing Africa's \$80bn trade financing gap



in these markets are able to trade seamlessly with international partners, stabilising supply chains and promoting stronger economic growth.

An Africa investment accelerator

The trade facility with GHIB is part of BII's Africa Resilience Investment Accelerator (ARIA) initiative, which aims to unlock investment in frontier markets that are currently underserved not only by commercial banks, but also development finance institutions.

David Banson, investment manager at BII, tells *African Business* that they were motivated to launch this initiative as "we think the trade finance gap is probably the biggest inhibitor to Africa's growth."

"SMEs provide a very broad base for economies to grow – they are the bedrock of economies and account for 80% of jobs in Africa," he says. "But they need to thrive in an environment where there is access to credit, there is access to the global economy, and, most importantly, where trade is not inhibited."

"If you have a trade finance gap, then it means you do not have all the facilities that allow trade to happen," Banson adds. "This trade finance gap that we are looking at reflects the amount of inhibition there is for economies in Africa to grow."

Richard Agbenu, chief commercial officer at GHIB, notes that the partnership with BII is vital as private sector banks simply do not have the capacity – or the balance sheet – to fill the trade finance gap alone.

"In international trade, every transaction is different – and therefore trade finance products need to be bespoke. Because of this, it is very time-consuming," he explains.

"You need to have knowledge of the various products involved in the trade, which takes time and resources. In a typical trade finance transaction, you need to ask for collateral, which then requires inspectors to verify this collateral. You have regulatory considerations to think about as well. For banks to be comfortable processing a transaction, all these things need to be in place."

"For most banks, there is therefore an opportunity cost in dealing with trade finance," Agbenu says. "Do we have the time to invest in this when we can just buy government paper and make nice returns? For the trade finance gap to be closed, there needs to be a deliberate effort and banks need to be incentivised."

BII hopes that the \$50m trade facility will ensure that GHIB has sufficient liquidity to offer trade finance products – while also freeing up the time and resources the bank needs to offer such services. Agbenu explains that "with the support of BII, we can distribute our risk, while the trade facility gives us greater leverage to deploy more capital."

Fanning out into frontier markets

Banson says they chose to partner with GHIB – which is, like BII, headquartered in London – as it is a systemically important bank in the seven markets

targeted under this initiative. He adds that it was essential for a development institution such as BII to get involved as regulatory obstacles make it very difficult for commercial banks to offer trade finance in frontier markets, which are perceived to be higher risk. "International confirming banks, because of the regulations that they have to deal with, are limited in their ability to offer services in countries such as Sierra Leone, if they have any capacity at all," Banson tells *African Business*.

"Regulations instruct confirming banks to model risk in Africa in a certain way, and these models mean there is a limit to what these banks can do in African markets. Africa bears the brunt of these global regulations."

"Because of the limits these regulations impose on these banks, the only way to make progress is through development finance institutions," Banson says. "We are not a commercial bank and are not bound by the same restrictions. Global regulations have created a need for development finance institutions to support commercial banks so they can offer trade finance in our target markets."

A survey in 2022 by the International Finance Corporation (IFC) found that in Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Nigeria, and Senegal trade finance supports only 25% of trade in goods. This was significantly below both the African average of 40% and the global average of between 60% and 80%.

Agbenu says that "if this is the number for the big West African countries, the number for much smaller countries like Liberia, Sierra Leone, The Gambia, and Guinea are likely even worse – possibly as low as 10% to 15%."

While it is difficult to forecast precise numbers, BII and GHIB aim to start significantly increasing the amount of business be-

ing supported by trade finance across these frontier markets. Strong growth is certainly feasible: Agbenu points out that, with the support of BII and other partners, GHIB was able to grow its trade finance volumes by 100% last year.

A model for commercial banks

Both Banson and Agbenu also note that BII and GHIB's work enhancing access to trade finance in these markets will ideally serve as a model for other commercial banks as to how they can offer such services in African markets.

Agbenu says "with BII joining us to do this, it gives other lenders comfort – it gives "visibility" for trade finance and will help promote it in the region."

Trade finance is vital in giving businesses the leverage they need to conduct international trade, expand their operations, create more jobs, and promote stronger economic growth.

Banson notes that "if trade finance is helping manufacturing companies import raw materials, for instance, you are not just enabling that manufacturing entity to be able to continue manufacturing.

"You are helping it to grow. And by growing, it will employ more people, and by employing more people, it will then be able to do more. That creates a virtuous cycle across the economy." ■



'In international trade, every transaction is different – and therefore trade finance products need to be bespoke. Because of this, it is very time-consuming'

Above: Loading sacks of cocoa beans at the port of Tema in Ghana.

In this interview **Sionlé Yeo**, group managing director and chief executive officer of the Atlantic Financial Group, AFG Holding, sets out the priorities of the financial services company.

A committed actor in building a uniquely African model of development

AFG Holding has made significant strides in financial sectors. What would you say has been the driving force behind the Group's success across the African continent?

The success of AFG Holding is built on four fundamental pillars: resilience in the face of challenges, a constant focus on our clients and markets, pragmatic innovation, and a sincere commitment to the continent's development. We have always believed that Africa requires strategies built from within, grounded in an intimate understanding of local realities. Our ability to combine operational excellence with adaptability has not only enabled us to grow but also to create lasting impact in each of the markets where we operate.

What role do partnerships with governments and local communities play in the success of your projects across Africa?

Our projects would never have achieved their scale without constant dialogue with governments and local communities. We firmly believe that economic growth only makes sense if it is shared. Our institutional partnerships ensure that our initiatives are aligned with national public policies, while our engagement with local communities anchors our projects in real economic needs. This dual approach guarantees that our contribution to economic development is both sustainable, inclusive, and fully aligned with our pan-African mission.

In your view, what are the biggest misconceptions that international investors have about doing business in Africa, and how can they be addressed?

One of the most damaging misconcep-

tions is the tendency to view Africa as a homogeneous and unstable terrain. In reality, it is a continent of exceptional diversity, rich in local dynamics and structural opportunities. To correct this biased perception, investors must adopt an approach based on listening, deep understanding of ecosystems, and long-term commitment.

Our experience has demonstrated that, by relying on locally rooted actors – such as AFG Holding – it is possible to combine economic performance with lasting impact.

Sustainability and social impact are increasingly central to corporate strategies. How is AFG Holding incorporating these principles into its operations and long-term vision?

For AFG Holding, sustainability is not an add-on; it is the foundation of our economic and social model. Through our core activities, we strive to combine financial performance with contributions to the continent's economic, social, and environmental progress.

This ambition is embodied by the Atlantic Group Foundation which reflects our societal impact commitments. Its mission – a sustainable Africa, free of inequalities, driven by a youth of excellence – guides concrete initiatives aimed at building an elite youth, expanding economic opportunities in rural areas, improving public health, addressing the climate crisis, and fostering civic engagement.

This integrated ecosystem between the Group and its Foundation enables us to contribute actively to a resilient, inclusive, and sustainable African development, in full alignment with our pan-African vision.

You seem particularly active in the financial inclusion segment. What initiatives motivate you to maintain this commitment?

Financial inclusion is a fundamental catalyst for economic growth and social cohesion. We are deploying financing solutions adapted to African realities, relying on digital innovation to democratise access to financial and insurance services. Our commitment is driven by a profound conviction: without inclusion, there can be no sustainable development. By supporting entrepreneurs, small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and historically under-banked populations, we are fulfilling our mission to grow with our customers and our economies, thus actively contributing to Africa's economic development.

Looking ahead, what are your top priorities for AFG Holding over the next five years, and how do you see the company contributing to Africa's broader economic transformation?

Our priorities for the next five years are centred on digital acceleration, sustainable investment, and controlled regional expansion. We aim to strengthen our role as a catalyst for inclusive growth in Africa, by supporting major and much needed energy, financial, and industrial transitions.

More than ever, our ambition is to be a committed actor in building a uniquely African model of development, a model rooted in innovation, inclusion, and economic sovereignty. AFG Holding will continue to place resilience, client orientation, innovation, and commitment at the service of this ambitious vision that will make us a major financial player across the continent.. ■



**AFG Holding's success
is rooted in resilience,
client focus, pragmatic
innovation, and a deep
commitment to Africa's
development – building
from within to create
lasting impact**

Sidi Ould Tah, candidate for president of the African Development Bank

The Mauritanian candidate for president of the African Development Bank tells Omar Ben Yedder that he will lean on his experience of leading the Arab Bank for Development in Africa to build a powerful multilateral institution that is fit for the future.

Sidi Ould Tah sets out stall for leadership of AfDB

Sidi Ould Tah has been a player in the top tier of African finance for some time now. For a decade, until April, he led the \$20bn Arab Bank for Development in Africa (BADEA), having previously served as minister of economy and finance as well as minister of economic affairs and development in his native Mauritania. Now, as Akinwumi Adesina's second and final tenure comes to an end, Tah has joined the list of contestants for the presidency of the African Development Bank (AfDB) as it chooses a successor on 29 May.

For Tah, the role offers a unique opportunity to shape the future of the continent through the transformational power of the Bank. "It's about improving lives and livelihoods, and making dreams a reality," he tells *African Business*.

The AfDB, with a capital base of over \$200bn and Triple A rating, is capable of rallying global partners behind Africa's development agenda, Tah observes. To him, this is not only a responsibility but a powerful incentive – particularly when it comes to empowering Africa's youth through job creation. "The potential is there, and for those of us who want to help transform the continent, the Bank is an incredibly powerful platform with which to do so," he says.

As he contemplates the issues that could potentially be in his in-tray, Tah's assessment is that the liquidity crunch, rising debt levels and the need for large scale financing require the most urgent attention. "This is an equation that needs solving. On one hand, countries are grappling with high debt and limited liquidity, especially during times of crisis. On the other, development needs are massive and growing." Tah believes the AfDB is uniquely positioned to help solve that equation, if only it can step more boldly into its leadership role.

'Agility is a real issue. The project cycle at the Bank can be slow, and by the time a project is approved, conditions on the ground may have changed, governments may even have changed for example'

The Bank, he says, needs to scale up its operations, streamline its interventions, and promote reforms across Africa's fragmented financial architecture. "If you compare Africa's institutional ecosystem to other regions, you see a lack of synergy between major players," he says in reference to the African Finance Corporation, African Export-Import Bank (Afreximbank) and the host of other regional development financial institutions with a similar mission to AfDB's. "There's a real opportunity for the AfDB to provide the leadership that brings these institutions together under a shared vision."

Tah, a polyglot able to hold his own in Arabic, French, English, Spanish and Portuguese, insists that the Bank can be a continental leader with the legitimacy and convening power to coordinate development efforts, as well as a catalyst, supporting and amplifying the impact of other financial institutions. Tah also sees untapped potential in mobilising domestic resources – pension funds, sovereign wealth funds, and insurance capital – and channelling them into transformative development. "AfDB should be the leader – that is its very mandate. But it also must act as a catalyst by crowding in regional development banks, sovereign and pension funds, and international institutional investors. I don't think that we are in a situation where the bank has exploited all the potential it has there. We need innovative solutions and the AfDB can be the platform to orchestrate them."

Scale up and speed up

Tah acknowledges that while significant strides have been made under the Bank's current leadership, including, notably, a significant boost in its capital base, Africa's needs remain vastly underfunded. The AfDB currently disburses between \$8bn and \$10bn a year, a figure that is dwarfed by the continent's annual



infrastructure financing gap, which he estimates conservatively at \$100bn.

“In comparative terms, the AfDB’s balance sheet remains modest – particularly when you look at its peers like the Asian Development Bank or the Inter-American Development Bank,” he notes. With paid-in capital at just \$12bn, Tah believes the time is ripe to explore new instruments such as hybrid capital and synthetic financing to boost the Bank’s lending capacity.

It’s not just about size, however; it’s also about speed. “Agility is a real issue,” Tah notes. “The project cycle at the Bank can be slow, and by the time a project is approved, conditions on the ground may have changed, governments may even have changed for example.”

That lag can undermine the effectiveness and relevance of interventions. In response to this, he is advocating an overhaul of the Bank’s operational model, including the streamlining of disbursement processes and a re-engineering of the project cycle.

“We need to shorten timelines without compromising integrity. Departments must work in parallel, not sequentially – and today’s IT solutions make that entirely feasible,” he proposes, adding, for good measure, that “the Bank needs to be more responsive, more agile, and needs to scale up its operations.”

Of course, whoever takes over at the AfDB will find themselves at the mercy of exogenous variables, with the global financial and trade system, never really a friend to the continent, under severe threat of disruption. Tah, however, places his faith in a united approach from the continent as a means of responding to the crises. “The Bank needs to work more with its partners, not only on the continent, but also globally, to bring solutions,” he says. “Short-term challenges and long-term transformation require different tools. By strengthening its partnerships, the Bank can better respond to both.”

Interview

Sidi Ould Tah, candidate for president of the African Development Bank**Get investors involved**

Tah is also keen to fully involve and utilise the private sector as an ally in Africa's development agenda. With public sector fiscal space constrained by high debt and limited resources, development of critical infrastructure and productive sectors must increasingly fall to the private sector.

"Unless we unlock the private sector, we won't be able to advance the African Continental Free Trade Area or meet the goals of Agenda 2063," he cautions. "The Bank must help create a conducive environment by removing the obstacles that hinder private sector development and foreign direct investment," he says, noting how private sector investment helped transform countries in Asia and South America.

"We need to encourage foreign direct investment within the continent to first fill the gap; and to create jobs for the youth and for women in the continent."

This is critical, he says, because of the continent's unique demography.

"One in four people in the world will be African within the next 25 years. Around 70% of our population will be youth."

Without immediate, targeted action to create opportunities, Tah says the continent could have a looming crisis. "We are already dealing with unemployment as a root cause of insecurity, terrorism and irregular migration. If population growth continues without solutions, the consequences – both for Africa and for global stability – will be profound."

Another area of concern for Tah is the state of the continent's micro, small and medium sized enterprises. Despite being at the receiving end of much lip service, these micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs), which account for between 80% and 90% of the continent's economic activity, remain in a parlous state, hampered by among other factors, lack of access to finance.

Micro-enterprise gap

"Only around 20% of SMEs in Africa have access to credit," Tah notes, "and the situation is even worse for micro-enterprises, many of which operate informally and are completely shut out of the financial system."

Changing this state of affairs, Tah argues, will require a dual strategy: improving access to financing and boosting the capacity of these businesses to access that credit.

"They need access to credit as well as capacity development to help them run their businesses – to develop business plans; to have some sort of financial statements; and also to have legal advisory services."

Along with that, he says, should come a guarantee system that enables African SMEs to access commercial loans. Currently, however, the guarantee systems

on the continent are fragmented and Tah wants to consolidate and coordinate them for better effect.

"There is a need to redefine and reorganise the guarantee mechanism. Right now, you have duplication in some countries and a lack of guarantees in others. For instance, the AGF (African Guarantee Fund) and FAGACE [the African Guarantee and Economic Cooperation Fund] are providing the same services in some countries, while many other countries in other regions do not have access to any type of guarantee."

Deploying his experience

For capital itself, Tah cites the Arab Coordination Group (ACG) as a likely blueprint for the AfDB can build on, pointing to collaboration between his recent bank, BADEA (an ACG member), and West Africa's

Banque Ouest Africaine de Développement (BOAD) to enhance the latter's capital base as a model that could be replicated more broadly.

"If we bring not just BADEA, but the entire Arab Coordination Group to the table," he argues, "we can do this at scale. [BADEA is] already working with Institutions like Shelter Afrique and the Trade and Development Bank to strengthen their capital base and if we bring the Arab Coordination Group on board, we can do it for more institutions"

Capital and coordination alone are not enough, however. Tah stresses that the continent must also harness the power of the "fourth industrial revolution" – namely artificial intelligence and blockchain technologies – to leapfrog development and bring transformative change. In particular, he sees great promise in deploying AI-driven solutions to revolutionise access to finance for the underserved.

"We are working currently on a pilot operation which will enable micro finance institutions to get a response to credit requests in 15 to 20 minutes without any guarantees, just using information gathered from [borrowers'] utility bills, from their behaviour, telecommunication consumption and others," he reveals, adding that "the promise of AI and

blockchain for the continent is quite substantial and we do believe that we can harness that to leapfrog".

For proof of concept of his ideas, Tah points to his time at BADEA, where he says the bank achieved much of its successes under him due to its ability to foster meaningful partnerships across institutions.

Not only was he able to expand BADEA's capital base, but was able to ensure that each dollar spent by the bank catalysed four more in additional investment. The bank's annual approvals increased twelvefold over a decade, while disbursements grew by a factor of eight. The period also saw increasing co-financing between BADEA and African develop-



'We need innovative solutions, and the AfDB can be the platform to orchestrate them – by mobilising resources, driving reforms, and harnessing technology for inclusive development'

Left: Sidi Ould Tah (R) with Wamkele Keabetswe Mene, secretary-general of the African Continental Free Trade Area.

Below: Sidi Ould Tah (R) with Fahad Aldossari, the chairman of the board of directors of BADEA.



the 2023 Saudi-Arab-African Economic Conference in Riyadh, where the ACG committed \$50bn to Africa, with BADEA playing a leading role in implementation.

The AfDB, he insists, holds the greatest potential to lead such collaborative strategies at scale. With its pan-African mandate, robust credit rating and established legitimacy, Tah sees the AfDB as uniquely positioned to galvanise actors across the public and private spectrum. “The convening power and mandate of the AfDB,” he observes, “give it a strong case to be the continent’s development leader.”

All this is necessary for a continent that Tah believes has tremendous potential, despite a perception problem that weighs on its development aspirations. That, too, is a problem he believes that AfDB must address, perhaps through a continental guarantee scheme that he is mooting.

“I believe it will be timely to establish a continental guarantee agency within the African Development Bank Group, which will help to provide not just a political risk guarantee, but also a commercial risk guarantee.” This would be more ambitious in scope than the World Bank’s Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency, Tah is quick to clarify. “Political risk guarantees are important, but they are not enough,” he argues. “We need to go beyond that, and work with international insurers and reinsurers to craft innovative solutions that truly unlock capital for Africa.”

The first 100 days

If he does win, Tah, who says he favours a collaborative and inclusive approach to leadership, expects to spend the first few months listening and consulting.

The softly spoken Tah, for those who know him, is someone who likes to get things done. He has a strong team of advisors and, speaking to them, they insist his 100-day plan is one of action: of engagement but also implementation. They point to his track record of working well with the current ecosystem, including other development finance institutions as well as institutional investors, to enhance impact at scale. There will be a strong focus on overcoming current constraints and bottlenecks to enhance speed and efficiency.

He says the Bank ought to have a strong system of effective feedback management, and hints that there would be some internal reorganisation to make the 60-year-old institution more responsive to contemporary challenges. Tah remains cautiously optimistic about Africa’s trajectory. Despite the multiple shocks of recent years – from the global pandemic to geopolitical tensions – he believes the continent can regain and sustain momentum.

The key, in his view, is not to hope for a crisis-free future, but to prepare for difficulties.

“We need to strengthen the resilience of the continent and its ability to navigate difficult times. We must remain ambitious and perseverant. If in ten years, we can look back and see that the AfDB has become the trusted broker between African countries and international investors – coordinating efforts, reducing duplication, and structurally transforming how finance operates on the continent – that would be a legacy to be proud of.” ■

With five years left to meet global goals, the Kampala Declaration issued from the 11th African Regional Forum for Sustainable Development, signals a shift from diagnosis to decisive action, urging value addition, digital investment and structural reform to drive inclusive growth and resilience. **Dianna Games** reports.

Africa must take charge: Turning ambition into action for sustainable transformation



The 11th African Regional Forum for Sustainable Development came to an end with calls for African countries to respond to evolving global circumstances by focusing on local value addition and intra-continental trade. Delivering his remarks at the closing ceremony, Leonard Zulu, UN Resident Coordinator, Uganda, praised President Yoweri Museveni for highlighting the urgent need for African countries to transform the continent's approach to development, recalling that "his message was clear: we must cease exporting our jobs and raw materials.

"He underlined that instead we must invest in our systems through advanced transportation, affordable greener energy, transformative education and robust financial systems and add intentional value

'When you export raw materials and somebody goes and makes more money out of it and creates jobs for their children, it means you are donating money and donating jobs'

addition to our abundant resources."

'Durable peace requires sustainable development'

Noting the interconnectedness of the challenges the continent faces, Zulu called for collective and integrated responses. "Durable peace requires sustainable development. Sustainable development requires sustainable financing. Sustainable financing requires control over economic and financial flows and this control requires robust state institutions," he argued.

Zulu further called for investment in science, technology and innovation, as well as a "transformative mindset that prevents the shipping away of jobs through the exporting of raw materials to intentional value addition on them".

For the continent to grow inclusively, Zulu

said, gender equality, youth empowerment and social protection must be prioritised. Partnerships must also be strengthened across government, civil society, the private sector and other stakeholders.

Claver Gatete, executive secretary of the UN Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), thanked delegates for their hard work and for putting together the Kampala Declaration. "This is not an ECA document. This is not a UN document. It's your document. Whatever is in there, it is your own input and at the end of the day, we all own it together," he said.

Reflecting on the evolution of the global financial system, Gatete noted that the cracks in the system had become clear since 2002.

"We realised that this financial system that was put in place after 1994 is not working for Africa. The Washington Consensus can no longer work for us." The continent, he said, has since been battered by a series of external shocks.

Now, with the impact of climate change being felt, the continent is under even more pressure. "Africa's debt now exceeds \$1 trillion, with annual interest payments surpassing \$100bn. The situation is not

Voices

It is important to attract young Africans from the diaspora, to show them that you can actually compensate for the skills and experience they have acquired abroad. You must also see how to improve the working environment for their professional and social wellbeing.

Ferdinand Manirakiza,
Deputy Minister of Communication, Information Technology and Media, Burundi

Africa accounts for less than 1% of global generative AI activity and only 2% of data used to train systems comes from our continent. There is a clear risk of excluding our African voices and needs from the technology that is shaping our futures. If this continues, we risk reinforcing digital dependency rather than building digital sovereignty

Mehdi Snene,
Special Advisor, United Nations Office for Digital and Emerging Technologies

sustainable. We are trying various innovative financing models but they are not enough."

Gatete pointed out that the efforts to restructure the continent's debt have been hampered by the complexity of the current credit arrangements. While the bulk of debt was previously owed to the Paris Club and thus lent itself to easy decision making, there are many more lenders now, including private ones, to consider.

"Bringing everyone together under the current geopolitical climate is difficult. That's why the G20's common framework is not working," he explained. The fact that only two African countries have ever achieved investment-grade status, Gatete stressed, is "a signal that we need to do things differently".

Presidents urge collaboration to build Africa

President Yoweri Museveni, host of the ARF-SD 11, stressed the need for Africa to stop exporting raw materials, saying: "When you export raw materials and somebody goes and makes more money out of it and creates jobs for their children, it means you are donating money and donating jobs.



Africa must solve its own problems

Robert Rae (*above far-right*), President of the UN Economic and Social Council and Canada's permanent representative to the UN, called for African countries to take control of their development agenda. He noted that Africa is "at the centre of the ideas, initiatives and actions that are going to make sure that the SDGs are rescued".

While acknowledging that Africa's challenges are reflective of wider global challenges, Rae encouraged the continent to pursue self-reliance. "We cannot assume that others will solve our problems for us, and we all know that if we help ourselves, we're more likely to get help from others," he argued, adding

that all high-growth countries had taken difficult decisions and mobilised their resources effectively.

Rae also urged countries to allow the private sector to play a greater role in development. "As important as governments are, the world's economy is driven more by non-governmental money, resources and capital than it is by governments themselves." "The reality is that the opportunities for Africa are going to be created by Africans. That doesn't mean the rest of the world doesn't care, but it does mean that the World Bank and the IMF should work for you; not you work for them."

"That is what Africans have been doing. I've banned the export of unprocessed minerals. No unprocessed mineral leaves Uganda now. I told our people that if we can't process the minerals, they must stay in the ground. Our grandchildren will process them."

The forum serves as a critical platform for dialogue and action, based on the theme, "Driving job creation and economic growth through sustainable, inclusive, science-and evidence-based solutions for the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063."

President Museveni said Uganda's agricultural sector employs 3.6m people, manufacturing and industry 1.4m people, and the services sector 5m. The ICT sector is currently employing 46,000 people. "We are just beginning, but you can see jobs can be created," he said.

Uganda's internal market is not big enough, he said. "We produce 5.3bn litres of milk, but the internal market is only 800m litres. If we didn't have the East African Community, the dairy sector in Uganda would have collapsed. So it must be emphasised that regional integration provides guaranteed markets for our businesses.

Emmerson Mnangagwa, President of Zimbabwe, also highlighted the need for collaboration.

"We cannot have individual countries championing as individual countries. There must be a connectedness of our efforts. We need to share, discuss and interrogate what means we have to achieve our goals."

He said that the Southern African Development Community recognises the

importance of its abundant natural resources, which offer a unique comparative advantage.

"Africa's transformation will not occur by chance. That responsibility lies with us, the leaders, and the people of this great continent. We must take charge of our development and our destiny.

"Let us, therefore, commit ourselves to the guiding objectives of inclusive development."

"With a youthful population and abundant resources, the potential for economic transformation in Africa is immense."

First Deputy Prime Minister of Equatorial Guinea, Gaudencio Mohaba Mesu, representing the country's President, urged countries to use their natural advantages to build economies and enhance regional development.

We must tell a new story of Africa

Africa stands at a pivotal moment, not only of challenge but of immense opportunity, said Amina Mohammed, Deputy Secretary General of the United Nations. "With just five years remaining to achieve the 2030 Agenda and the second decade of Agenda 2063 now under way, we must confront the hard truths and match them with bold and courageous solutions.

The annual financing gap to achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) stands at a staggering \$200bn and foreign direct investment to Africa declined in 2024 by 1.9%, falling to \$53bn.

Over 60% of countries are either in or at a higher risk of debt distress. In 2023 five African countries spent more on external debt servicing than on health and education combined. "This is unacceptable."



Investing in digital skills will foster inclusive growth in Africa, experts say

Science, technology and innovation (STI) are poised to play a pivotal role in helping Africa accelerate the realisation of the ambitious goals outlined in the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063, experts told a panel at the Africa Regional Forum on Sustainable Development.

They emphasised the need for increased investments in higher education to equip young Africans with the skills required to be competitive in the modern tech-driven economy.

Barnabas Nawangwe, vice-chancellor of Makerere University, Uganda, moderated the session. He expressed concern over the continent's low enrolment. "We have the lowest enrolment in higher education in Africa at 6% versus just 32% globally. This is a big challenge," he said.

Robert Lisinge, director of the technology, innovation, connectivity and infrastructure development division

of the ECA, pointed out that unequal access to digital technologies continues to be a major impediment to inclusive growth in Africa.

"Africa is grappling with a significant digital divide, marked by disparities in access to technology, connectivity, and digital literacy. To bridge this divide it is essential to adopt global strategies to meet local needs in a secure, safe and inclusive way, aligned with the SDGs and the Global Digital Compact," Lisinge remarked.

Monica Musenero, Uganda's Minister for Science Technology and Innovation, highlighted the need for technological solutions that address Africa's core developmental challenges, particularly poverty reduction.

"The biggest policy shift needed is to ensure that science goes from being philosophical and it becomes a science that builds industries," she said.

Mehdi Snene, Special Advisor to the United Nations Office for Digital and Emerging Technologies, underlined the significant potential of artificial intelligence (AI) for Africa, but warned

about the substantial gap in training AI systems using African data and African languages.

Jacqueline Amongin, a Ugandan representative on the East African Legislative Assembly, called for robust data governance and protection laws to ensure the safe and secure deployment of artificial intelligence.

"At a regional level we're already working on a data governance protection law, which will help harmonise laws across our eight member states in the East African Community," she said.

Collin Babirukamu, Executive Director of IT, Bank of Uganda, highlighted the urgent need for a comprehensive strategy to address not only skills development, but also the persistent infrastructure gaps hindering the growth of Africa's digital economy.

"We must reduce the digital divide, increase internet penetration, and power access. Even smartphone access in the hands of the youth is a key economic driver. We must make sure that our policies leave no one behind," he stressed.

The goals of Abuja Declaration remain a distant ambition. Half of African countries spend less than 6% of national budgets on health and the high cost of digital access, especially in rural areas, continues to exclude millions of people.

"But these figures do not define us. Africa is not standing still. We are standing up. Despite global headwinds, our continent accounted for nine of the world's fastest-growing economies in 2024. Progress against HIV and AIDS is encouraging, with nearly two dozen countries recording significant declines in new infections.

"Women across the continent are leading change. Today 26% of parliamentary seats in Africa are held by women, up from 19% in 2015. But this does mask some of the inequalities in different countries.

"Now we must turn words into actions.

'Durable peace requires sustainable development. Sustainable development requires sustainable financing. Sustainable financing requires control over economic and financial flows'

"Our average GDP growth, since 2019 has hovered around 3%, which is far below the 7% needed to achieve just SDG 8 on work and economic growth.

"It is clear now that aid can no longer be considered a reliable or sustainable solution, and traditional financing models are increasingly misaligned with Africa's development aspirations."

Gatete outlined the many challenges of meeting the five SDGs under the spotlight at the event – Good Health and Wellbeing (SDG 3), Gender Equality (SDG 5), Decent Work and Economic Growth (SDG 8), Life Below Water (SDG 14) and Partnerships for the Goals (SDG 17).

To reverse the trend on SDGs, "we must move beyond diagnosing our challenges to implementing bold and actionable solutions."



Across these efforts, Africa's leadership and innovation continues to inspire. From local solutions to global negotiations, African countries are driving forward a bold vision for inclusive sustainable development.

"The stronger connections between regional economic commissions and resident coordinators anchored by the Secretary General's reforms have allowed new opportunities to align policy and operations and deliver integrated support across Africa on Africa's priorities.

"This has given me great confidence that we can accelerate action on the SDGs and Agenda 2063. This year brings major global milestones – the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development, the second World Social Summit, the UN Food Systems Summit Stocktake in Ethiopia and COP30 in Brazil. Africa's voice must shape every one of these global milestones.

"Let's seize this forum and the Kampala Declaration as a catalyst for regional leadership and global solidarity.

"Let's scale what works, deepen our partnerships and create the enabling conditions for investment and innovation. Let's tell a new story of African solutions driven

by African leadership, especially our young people, powered by African people and anchored in African values.

"Let's turn ambition into action in solidarity with the African Union in service of the Africa we want."

Sobering data

With just five years to go to 2030, the target for meeting the SDG goals, the data is sobering.

Out of 144 measurable SDG targets, only 10 are on track, while 106 are progressing too slowly, with 28 regressing, said Claver Gatete of the ECA. "We simply cannot afford to continue at this pace. The forum was convened under the theme: Driving job creation and economic growth through sustainable, inclusive, science and evidence-based solutions for the 2030 Agenda and AU Agenda 2063.

"To reverse this trend, we must move beyond diagnosing our challenges to implementing bold and actionable solutions.

"As we speak, structural vulnerabilities, including the lingering effects of Covid-19, climate shocks, conflicts and geopolitical tensions, as well as mounting debt burdens, continue to stifle Africa's progress.

He proposed four strategic pillars to mobilise the resources to achieve the SDGs and AU Agenda 2063.

The first is to scale up domestic resource mobilisation. "If we restrain illicit financial flows, estimated at \$89bn annually, alongside harnessing sovereign wealth funds, we can secure billions for our developmental needs."

Remittance-backed bonds could increase the \$53bn FDI that flowed to Africa in 2023. "It is time derisk our economies, elevate capital market development and expand access to affordable finance, he said.

He said the African free trade area needs to be properly harnessed to advance Africa's agenda and more could be done in the digital space.

"Investing in digital connectivity, artificial intelligence, blockchain solutions and evidence-based policymaking will drive efficiencies in trade, governance and service delivery.

"The clock is ticking. The next five years must be marked by bold leadership, decisive policies and strengthened partnerships that will place Africa on a trajectory of sustainable prosperity." ■

The Afreximbank African Trade Centres aim to catalyse investment, trade and development, writes Robert Tomusange.

Trade hubs can catalyse business across Africa and the Caribbean

On 19 April Nigeria witnessed the opening of the first Afreximbank African Trade Centre (AATC), a state-of-the-art twin nine-storey office and business hotel complex. The Abuja AATC offers a new example of creating clusters that will help cement business opportunities, change mindsets and elevate the business environment across our continent.

This commercial development matters because, as the first of many across Africa, it will create new benchmarks in real estate and in corporate workspaces. And in an increasingly turbulent world, fraught with uncertainty and increased isolationism, bringing African solutions to transform our continent has become an urgent imperative.

Despite some setbacks and a shift in priorities, building a sustainable future must be at the core of African policy. This facility, designed to transform Africa's trade and investment landscape, incorporates green-certified architecture, aligning with global environmental standards. It has an office tower and a 148-bed four-star business hotel. Its business and trade facilities will provide dedicated spaces for trade exhibitions, the incubation of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and conference and business amenities. Connections catalyse action.

Founding principles

The African Export-Import Bank (Afreximbank) was created to provide counter-cyclical support and to drive the transformation of our continent through, among other priorities, greater trade.

In an increasingly fragmented world, building bridges is important because the last few years have shown that self-reliance is not only a solution, but a necessity



Our forefathers called for economic self-reliance. These trade centres are going to be hubs for businesses, fostering innovation and empowering small businesses as well as enhancing global trade participation.

The bank's model of developing integrated trade services hubs is unique, and will be replicated at scale across Africa because the continent needs models that are scalable and replicable.

The journey to the launch of the Abuja AATC began in 2018 when the idea of creating trade facilitation hubs in key commercial capitals across Africa was first mooted. Nine leading commercial cities were selected to host the network of AATCs across Africa and the Caribbean. They include Abuja (Nigeria), Harare (Zimbabwe), Kampala (Uganda), Cairo (Egypt), Abidjan (Côte d'Ivoire), Yaoundé (Cameroon), Kigali (Rwanda), Tunis (Tunisia) and Bridgetown (Barbados).

Having received land from Nigeria and Zimbabwe, the projects were launched in November 2021 and September 2022 in Abuja and Harare. Four years later, the Abuja AATC is changing the cityscape. The Harare AATC will be formally opened in August. Construction of the Kampala AATC commenced in November 2024, and the Cairo AATC is planned for September 2025.

These developments are all public-private partnerships, involving government, investors and a multilateral development bank. They help us deliver on the vision of our founders to provide bespoke financing solutions and advisory services for the expansion, diversification, promotion and development of intra- and extra-African trade.

A transatlantic beacon

You may ask: why is Afreximbank in the Caribbean? The Barbados AATC will serve as a beacon of trade by embodying the ambition, resilience, and influence of leading commercial cities in Africa and the Caribbean – as well as offering a dynamic focal point for commerce by fostering regional and global trade connections between Africa and the greater CARICOM region, which comprises 20 countries.

To echo our president, Benedict Oramah, the Barbados AATC will serve as the gateway for Afri-Caribbean trade and investments, creating opportunities for doing business with the Caribbean and for Caribbean enterprises doing business in Africa.

In an increasingly fragmented world, building bridges is important because the last few years have shown that self-reliance is not only a solution, but a necessity.

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Robert Tomusange is director and global head of real estate and administration at Afreximbank.



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*The US president's punishing tariff regime – and the uncertainty over the extent to which it will be implemented – is likely to dent African economies, reports **Harry Clynh**.*

Trump's tariff war brings pain to African economies



US President Donald Trump has made no secret of his fondness for tariffs – which he has taken to frequently branding “the most beautiful word in the dictionary”. It therefore could have come as no surprise to markets and policymakers when, speaking from the White House at the start of April, the President announced his “Liberation Day” measures imposing sweeping tariffs on countries around the world.

One might, however, be forgiven for being surprised at the country which was singled out for especially harsh treatment: Lesotho. The tiny African nation, which primarily exports diamonds and clothing, received the highest “Liberation Day” tariff of 50%.

Trump’s tariffs were calculated by taking the US trade deficit with each country and dividing that number by the total value of imports from that nation. Almost all countries face a blanket minimum of 10%. Poorer nations such as Lesotho, which exports around \$55m worth of diamonds annually to the US but imports barely anything, were therefore found to be the “worst offenders”.

Madagascar, which exports relatively modest amounts of vanilla and clothing to the US while importing very little, was similarly condemned under this calculation. The East African island was hit with a tariff of 47% as a result of the perceived trade disparity.

“Large and persistent annual US goods trade deficits have led to the hollowing out of our manufacturing base, inhibited our ability to scale advanced domestic manufacturing capacity, undermined critical supply chains and rendered our defence-industrial base dependent on foreign adversaries,” according to an executive order issued by the President seeking to explain the thinking behind this move.

“Large and persistent annual US goods trade deficits are caused in substantial part by a lack of reciprocity in our bilateral trade relationships.”

Backtracks bring respite and uncertainty

There has been some respite for Lesotho, Madagascar and every other country facing steep tariffs. The week after “Liberation Day,” Trump temporarily backtracked by announcing there would be a ninety-day pause for all countries, during which time only the universal 10% baseline tariff would apply.

This is with the exception of China, which, thanks to a series of retaliations and counter-retaliations, at the time of writing faces tariffs of 145% on most of its exports to the US. American firms exporting to China have been hit with a slightly lower rate of 125%.

However, African governments, policymakers and business leaders are still grappling with the fallout – and trying to assess what the long-term consequences for the continent could be.

Daniel Silke, a political economy analyst based in Cape Town, tells *African Business* that “the on-off tariff threats have unleashed uncertainty in markets across the world.”

“It is an old cliché, but it remains correct: markets do not like uncertainty, whether in the major capitals of the world, or in developing countries,” he says.

Madagascar, which exports relatively modest amounts of vanilla and clothing to the US while importing very little, was condemned under Trump’s tariff calculation

Opposite: US President Donald Trump signs an executive order entitled “Make America Wealthy Again” in the Rose Garden of the White House.

Cheta Nwanze, founder of Lagos-based geopolitical research firm SBM Intelligence, is relatively optimistic that the impact of tariffs on Africa’s real economy will be limited – but agrees that the uncertainty and market disruption could affect investor sentiment and therefore dent capital flows into the continent.

“For many African countries, the informal sector is huge. In Nigeria for example, the oil sector accounts for about 90% of government revenue but only about 6% of GDP. The entire oil industry employs fewer than 100,000 people in a country of 200m,” he explains.

Nwanze says these dynamics create a “dissonance” in which sectors highly vulnerable to global markets and geopolitical events “create an outsized amount of noise” on issues such as tariffs, which do not always directly impact the much larger informal economy.

He points out that “from an African point of view, the US trade disappearing does not have too much of a real effect because, with the possible exception of Djibouti, every African country trades more with China than the US.”

Africa exposed to trade war

While the direct economic impact of tariffs on African countries may be limited in this sense, there is a risk that the continent could be exposed to the consequences of the escalating trade war between Washington DC and Beijing.

The drop in trade between the world’s two largest economies is likely to be enormous: the World Trade Organization projects an 80% decline in US-China merchandise trade in 2025. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has previously warned that Sub-Saharan Africa could be the region worst impacted by “geoeconomic fragmentation” resulting from trade barriers imposed between East and West.

Nwanze is confident that Chinese demand for African goods and resources will stay strong despite the potential damage tariffs will cause to its economy. “China has been preparing for this for quite a while: the Belt and Road Initiative can be seen as ‘geostrategic preparation’ through which China has strengthened its internal market while creating new external markets,” he says.

However, Silke is more concerned about African economies being caught in the crossfire. In particular, he believes the steep drop in goods trade between the US and China is likely to create a large surplus of Chinese goods on the market – something that could potentially undercut African producers.

“I think that there will be a lot of products available from China as a result of these tariffs. Chinese goods will no longer go to the United States; they will likely be offloaded to developing markets and sold at relatively cheap prices,” Silke tells *African Business*.

“This is a threat to African manufacturing, which cannot compete at these levels. It puts a brake on Africa’s ability to produce basic goods and services at affordable prices as it will be difficult to compete with the low prices coming out of China.”

Silke also fears that the political fallout from US-China tensions will potentially force African countries to pick a side – undermining efforts through initiatives such as the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) to harmonise trading regulations and promote intra-African trade. □ *Continues on page 77*



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Above: Ibrahim Boucar cultivates organic and conventional vanilla and exports it all over the world.

“This really places African countries in a very awkward position. Some will feel as though they can deal more satisfactorily with Washington, some will feel as though they want to move closer to China,” he says.

“This will pose difficulties for a continent which is trying to find commonality when it comes to trade regulations. Those countries that move closer to China will be in a different orbit to those countries that engage in closer trade ties with Washington,” Silke adds. “This could break the idea of the more united trading bloc that Africa can and probably should become.”

Dollar depreciation?

The impact of Trump’s tariffs on foreign exchange markets could also have an impact on African economies. The dollar initially soared against emerging market currencies after Trump’s election win in November as markets predicted tariffs would increase inflation in the States, forcing the Federal Reserve to keep interest rates higher and feeding demand for the dollar.

Most analysts now expect, however, that the disruption caused by the imposition of tariffs could lead to a depreciation of the US dollar. The global investment bank Goldman Sachs, for example, has suggested the dollar will weaken by as much as 10% against other major currencies as a result of slowing GDP growth and reduced investor confidence in the States.

Silke notes that “I would expect the dollar to weaken – investors will be hesitant to invest in the United States as a result of the volatility we have seen and the uncertainty as to how tariffs are being applied. I do not think this is good for domestic US business and therefore I think that we will see pressure on the US dollar going forward.”

He adds that a weaker dollar would “provide a modicum of improvement to African

‘This could break the idea of the more united trading bloc that Africa can and probably should become’

economies,” given that imports priced in dollars would become relatively cheaper and therefore reduce inflationary pressures. However, these gains would be dependent “on African economies [achieving] a level of domestic political stability in order to maintain decent values for their own domestic currencies”.

A greater risk for African countries potentially comes from moves in bond markets. Yields on both ten- and thirty-year US Treasury bonds went up significantly in the days after the tariff announcement, with the yield for thirty-year treasuries currently standing at 4.87% in late April – an almost 25% rise compared to September last year. Silke says this means “borrowing costs could well become more onerous, certainly for the United States, but potentially for other parts of the world as well.”

Nwanze adds that an environment of higher interest rates in the US, which is likely as a result of the inflationary pressures caused by the imposition of tariffs, would “definitely have a negative impact on African countries which have been taking on bigger and bigger amounts of dollar-denominated debt”.

Much continues to remain uncertain as to what Trump plans to do on trade in the coming months. What seems more evident, as Silke and Nwanze both say, is that the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) – a US government programme that allows eligible African countries duty-free access to parts of the American market – is dead.

It is difficult to forecast, especially in these early days, exactly how much damage will be done to African economies as a result of escalating trade tensions. But as Silke points out, the fracturing of the global trading environment will “have a negative effect on the broader global economy”.

“The cloud of recession hangs over everyone, everywhere – and Africa certainly does not escape that.” ■

The UK sports network has struck a deal to broadcast the traditional Nigerian combat sport to millions of potential new viewers. **Will McBain** talks to the fighters, promoters and broadcasters making it happen.

Network DAZN prepares to dazzle world with Dambe

The fighter named “Coronavirus” steps into the sand just after sunset, his bare feet stirring red dust as drums pound a war rhythm behind him. Dambe – arguably the world’s oldest continuously practised combat art – demands spear and shield. With one fist wrapped in *kora* rope – previously dipped in resin to harden it – to serve as a lethal striking spear, and the other left bare as a shield, the fighter sizes up his opponent, times his breath, and lands a precise knockout hook in under a minute. Kano’s crowd erupts. He lifts his arms, chest heaving, as spectators chant the nickname given to him during the pandemic – Coronavirus – spoken now with awe rather than fear. “They named me after a killer,” he says between breaths, “because I fight like the virus spreads its fear.”

For the fighters, glory is inseparable from duty. Dambe fighters typically earn between \$20 and \$500 per bout – sums that dwarf Nigeria’s ₦70,000 monthly minimum wage (about \$47). “With every payout, I buy land and build a house for my mother,” he tells *African Business*. He also funds weddings for his sisters, school fees for nieces and nephews, and medical care for ageing relatives. In a country where many work months to save even a fraction of that, every knockout is a lifeline for entire families.

Starting this June, UK sports network DAZN will broadcast African Warriors Fighting Championship’s (AWFC) Dambe World Series live into more than 200 territories, bringing the spectacle to millions of potential fight fans worldwide. The five-event series builds on the breakthrough success of 2024’s King of Dambe – AWFC’s inaugural showcase that pitted British debutant Luke Leyland against veteran Shagon Yellow. Yellow’s second-round stoppage sent 10,000 fans in Kano into a frenzy and drew millions more online, ushering in Dambe’s place on the global fight stage.



Tradition meets the market

Dambe traces its roots to the Hausa clearings of northern Nigeria, where warriors once clashed with spear and shield.

Contested on the dusty sand of the *dandali* open space, beneath the thunder of talking drums, bouts hinge on timing and precision: a single clean blow to the head or torso can end the match instantly. Shoulder strikes and grappling grips are ways to gain ascendancy in battle. More than simple “boxing”, Dambe fuses ritual, raw athleticism and centuries-old musical ceremony into every knockout spectacle.

DAZN – which broadcasts boxing from promoters such as Matchroom and Queensberry, and serves as the US-based Professional Fighters League (PFL) broadcast partner in Africa – will weave Dambe bouts into its paid subscription schedule alongside football and boxing cards.

The arrangement marks DAZN’s first partnership with the sport and positions Dambe on a platform with 20m paid subscribers and roughly 300m monthly active users.

Behind this shift stands Maxwell Kalu, a British-Nigerian graduate of Swansea University who spent years in London’s PR world before an Uber driver in Lagos rerouted his plans. Under a flyover he encountered fighters duelling to the beat of talking drums and knew no franchise could replicate that energy.

“It had to be rooted in Nigerian heritage,” he recalls. Kalu spent months researching customary rules – timed rounds, medical checks, safety protocols – and in 2017 launched AWFC’s first professional Dambe events in Kano and Katsina.

What began as a grassroots effort has since evolved into a regulated sport with formal governance.

Internet sends Dambe global

Digital vitality has fuelled Dambe’s rise. AWFC’s YouTube channel boasts 36,300 subscribers and over 1,100 videos. Nigeria itself has 107m internet users (a 45.4% penetration) and 36.75m social-media accounts, according to DataReportal. Clips of savage knockouts and triumphant finishers spread within hours. In Brazil and the United States – AWFC’s second- and third-largest online markets – viewers tune in for the display of raw power and cultural ceremony.

In a briefing with *African Business* earlier this year, DAZN emphasised that it has overhauled its pay-per-view platform with gamification features, real-time interaction tools and partnerships with leading influencers to deliver immersive, next-generation combat sports experiences in Africa. DAZN says Dambe’s centuries-old ritual, raw athleticism and knockout spectacle align perfectly with that vision – offering exactly the visceral, culturally authentic content DAZN is banking on to engage Africa’s rapidly growing digital audience.

The commercial backdrop supports this momentum. The global combat sports products market was

valued at \$8.89bn in 2024 and is forecast to reach \$9.54bn in 2025, growing at a 7.2% compound annual rate, according to the Business Research Company. Meanwhile, the mixed martial arts (MMA) equipment segment alone is estimated at \$1.39bn, says the IMARC Group. As Dambe joins the mainstream combat sports ecosystem, manufacturers of gloves, protective gear, training equipment and branded merchandise stand to benefit from rising consumer demand from Dakar to Durban.

Preserving Dambe’s heritage while scaling for broadcast is a delicate balance. AWFC formalised its rule set – including strict round times, pre-fight medical checks and on-site ambulances – in coordination with state police and cultural ministries. This partnership has become a blueprint for scaling traditional sports without losing authenticity, says Kalu.

Kalu envisions Dambe as the cornerstone of a pan-African combat sports network. His plans extend beyond Nigeria’s borders, scouting Senegal’s traditional wrestling and South Africa’s boxing circuits to build continental leagues of diverse disciplines.

“We’re creating Africa’s largest combat sports platform,” he says. “Dambe is our foundation, but the sky’s the limit.”

DAZN pitches for African audience

For DAZN, Dambe’s debut is part of a broader multi-sport strategy in Africa. The platform has rolled out a freemium tier to draw new users into its ecosystem, along with regional pricing and partnerships with local telcos and cable operators to integrate DAZN content without disrupting existing subscriptions. These moves pave the way for DAZN to boost its presence in football, basketball, rugby union and more – targeting Africa’s young, urbanised and

digitally savvy population.

Africa’s sports landscape is transforming. With close to half its population under age 18 and smartphone penetration soaring, demand for high-quality sports content has never been higher, says Kalu. As digital nomads, diaspora returnees and local fans mix global tastes with traditional culture, niche sports like Dambe are poised to capture mainstream attention. “Every knockout clip is more than a viral moment,” he says, “it’s a cultural bridge connecting Kano to screens in Seoul and São Paulo. This is Nigeria’s contribution to combat sports, and we’re taking it global.”

When DAZN’s cameras light up the next Dambe bout this June, fighters will enter a new arena where tradition meets technology and local warriors become global icons. Every punch and cheer will echo beyond northern Nigeria, carried on digital pulses to corners of the world that once knew nothing of Dambe. For Coronavirus and his peers, it proves that an art born in ceremony can, when governed and broadcast, re-define African sport.

“I have a dream to become the AWFC World Series champion,” he says, eyes bright with that global promise. “DAZN promotes Dambe all over the world, so please keep watching.” ■



Opposite and above: Dambe warriors fight in the ring in Dei-Dei, Abuja, Nigeria.

The company is looking to grow beyond Nigeria and believes biometric ID could be revolutionary for financial services, reports **Harry Clynnh**.

Nigeria-focused fintech unicorn Moniepoint eyes further growth

In October last year the Nigeria-focused fintech Moniepoint became Africa's newest "unicorn" after raising \$110m in a Series C funding round that valued the company at over \$1bn. While tighter monetary conditions since 2022 have led to a drop in the amount of venture capital funding flowing into Africa's tech and fintech industry, Moniepoint achieving unicorn status was read by many as a sign of the growing maturity of the market.

Reflecting on last year's landmark funding round, Pawel Swiatek, Moniepoint's chief operating officer, tells *African Business* that it shows "we are in a moment of great opportunity" for the African fintech space. "There are lots of people who are ready and



interested and keen to participate in modern financial services. This is facilitated by a combination of cloud-based infrastructure – which means you don't have to build data centres – almost pervasive mobile broadband coverage, the fact that smartphones are getting super cheap, and if you can't afford a smartphone, other phones that can work via USSD and still hold value for transactions," he says. USSD is unstructured supplementary service data – a Global System for Mobile Communications (GSM) protocol that is similar to short message service (SMS).

"Even if you can't afford a phone at all, you can use the mobile broadband network to access agency banking, the way Moniepoint operates. This combination of infrastructural elements is revolutionary."

Moniepoint works both through an online banking app and through physical point-of-sale (POS) machines – portable devices that allow small businesses to conduct transactions. POS machines are also carried by hundreds of thousands of Moniepoint agents across Nigeria to facilitate cash withdrawals and other financial activities for individuals who do not have access to internet banking. Moniepoint now serves over 10m businesses and individuals in Nigeria, processing over 800m monthly transactions.

These services have proved particularly valuable for small businesses because by using Moniepoint's POS machines they secure a digital record of their transactions. Swiatek explains that this "robust set of data" means "we have a point of view about how stable their business is, which allows us to offer them operating capital loans – this is rocket fuel for growth."

Growth plans

Following the Series C round last year, Moniepoint is eyeing further growth in Nigeria before expanding to other African markets.

"The growth in Nigeria is likely to continue – it's such a big market that there's so much more of it to cover. We plan on expanding our product portfolio – we recently rolled out Moniebook, which offer business management and bookkeeping tools," Swiatek tells *African Business*.

"It's an added offering to make us the one-stop shop for small business owners. We'll look for ways to add more things that are useful to those customers."

Swiatek does note, however, that Moniepoint faces several challenges in achieving this higher growth in Nigeria – particularly when it comes to identity management.

A lack of formal documentation in the country, especially in more remote or underserved areas, means it can be difficult for financial institutions to identify and verify unique individuals, making it riskier to offer financial services.

Is biometric ID the future?

Swiatek is encouraged by the growth of biometric

identification, to which more than 115m Nigerians now have access. He says the technology could be "revolutionary".

"In a country where you can't be sure what people's names are, let alone other things such as their dates of birth, it is challenging to confidently identify each unique individual," he explains.

"If you can get to a place where you can do that, it really changes the game in terms of financial services

and fund flows – because you can know enough about each person to authorise transactions up to a certain limit," Swiatek adds. "This helps us offer remote, mobile-based financial services with a much lower rate of identity theft and fraud."

"Of course, getting over 200m people into the system is quite a mountain to climb. There are also practical questions: how do you fingerprint people in remote areas of the country where in some parts it's completely unsafe?"

"But you don't need 100% coverage to achieve these aims," he says. "It's a virtuous cycle: the more people that get covered, the more value is offered by the digital economy, and the more people that want to sign up and participate."

Beyond Nigeria

Moniepoint is also looking to expand into other markets, with Swiatek hoping for this to happen within the next couple of years.

He says that Moniepoint will likely look to do this through inorganic growth – acquisitions – and notes that they are already "looking for companies in other countries that do similar things to what we do" with the view to completing some acquisitions. Swiatek says that "there's nothing concrete yet" as to which African markets specifically Moniepoint is planning to expand into, although there are a few contenders. "Kenya and Tanzania have tended to be at the top of the list – East Africa generally. Egypt is always big and interesting. But there are also great stories in other West African countries."

Foreign exchange risks

A crucial part of the decision will depend on foreign exchange risk. Moniepoint is domiciled in the United States and is mainly backed by Western investors, meaning the company's accounting currency is the US dollar.

This means the company's profits are highly exposed to fluctuations in naira markets – even if the company is continuing to grow strongly in Nigeria, a drop in the value of naira can mean its US dollar profits fall despite this growth.

Swiatek says that "while the naira has now thankfully stabilised, one of the challenges that we always contend with is exchange rate risk."

"Our international expansion aims are at least partially driven by a desire to diversify and have macroeconomic and forex exposure to other countries and not just Nigeria." ■



If you can confidently identify people, 'it really changes the game – you can know enough about each person to authorise transactions up to a certain limit'

Above: Moniepoint says its point-of-sale machines empower small retailers with digital transaction records, unlocking access to loans and fuelling business growth.

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SPECIAL REPORT

TICAD

The Ninth Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD 9) will be hosted by the Japanese government in Yokohama on 20–22 August. Held against a backdrop of global economic dislocation, it will build on decades of deepening cooperation. We

hear from crucial decision-makers at the heart of the relationship, including Horiuchi Toshihiko, director-general of African affairs at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (see page 90), Takeharu Yamanaka, mayor of host city Yokohama (see page

88) and Ankit Khandelwal, director of Africa coverage in the corporate banking division at Japan's MUFG (see page 98). We also profile the deepening ties between Africa and Japan in infrastructure (see page 94) and gas and renewable energy (see page 96).



Yoshimasa Hayashi (L), then Japanese foreign minister, shakes hands with Naledi Pandor, then South African foreign affairs minister.

Tokyo International Conference on African Development

*Investment flows remain modest, but there are some signs that the Land of the Rising Sun is becoming more enthusiastic about developing ties with Africa, reports **Ben Payton** ahead of the Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD) in Yokohama in August.*

Japan and Africa: a marriage made at TICAD?

As African governments scour the globe for economic partners, Japan is not necessarily an obvious place to look. Few Japanese companies maintain a conspicuous presence in Africa, preferring instead to focus on markets closer to home in other parts of Asia. Africa received just 0.5% of Japan's foreign direct investment by value in 2024 according to the Japanese Ministry of Finance.

Distance is one factor hampering the Japan-Africa relationship. Only one African city, Cairo, has a direct flight to Tokyo. The language barrier is another hindrance. And Japan's historically risk-averse business culture also seems to hold many Japanese companies back from investing in Africa.

Signs of youthful enthusiasm

Yet there are signs that ties are beginning to deepen. Japanese companies are now "polarised" in how they view Africa, says Keiichi Shirato, a professor of international relations at Ritsumeikan University in Kyoto. "Some companies are very conservative, and they are very hesitant to do business in Africa," he explains.

But this is balanced by companies led by younger executives – who often have a more international outlook and better English language skills – which are forging ahead with efforts to explore opportu-

nities in Africa. These companies tend to recognise that Africa is a "potentially a big market in terms of population," says Shirato. Many view the continent as a promising region to expand their businesses, given that their domestic market is set to shrink significantly as Japan's population declines in the coming decades.

Expected expansion

Shirato adds that although the government of Shinzo Abe, which led Japan between 2012 and 2020, had limited success in its efforts to encourage Japanese foreign direct investment (FDI) in Africa, the outlook may now be more promising. He points to a survey compiled by JETRO, the Japan External Trade Or-



ganization, showing that 57% of Japanese companies operating in Africa expect to expand over the next two years. This is the second highest level of any region globally, after southwest Asia.

Into Africa

Of course, some links between Japan and Africa are well-established. Japanese-made cars are ubiquitous across the continent, while Japanese technology plays a largely unseen role in energy systems and digital technology networks. Most major Japanese financial institutions have established some presence in Africa and the Japanese government has been promoting investment for

Companies led by younger executives – who often have a more international outlook – are forging ahead to explore opportunities in Africa

more than 30 years since the first Tokyo International Conference on African Development in 1993.

Emma Ruiters, an expert in Japan-Africa relations and digital and tech transformation associate consultant at the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, says Japanese investors are now placing “renewed importance” on the continent, while the triannual TICAD forums have become “a lot more prominent”.

And though Japanese businesses have tended to struggle with cultural differences while attempting to operate in Africa, some have found ways to adapt.

Indeed, Japanese businesses often work closely with Japanese government institutions while operating in Africa. In particular, Ruiters says programmes involving the Japan International Cooperation Agency



South Africa's minister of international relations and cooperation, Ronald Lamola, attending a Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD) ministerial meeting in Tokyo, Japan.

Tokyo International Conference on African Development



(JICA) can provide a starting point for Japanese commercial investors to enter the continent.

“They’ve definitely taken a different approach, in some ways a more developmental approach to their investment, because I think they’ve seen that there’s still quite a big need to fatten-up the pipeline of projects in Africa.”

Ruiters also notes that, in contrast to their counterparts in China, Japanese companies operating in Africa tend not to bring large numbers of expatriate staff. This reflects how, domestically, Japan has a “very constrained labour market”, meaning Japanese companies doing business in Africa need to find reliable local partners to work with.

Shirato offers a similar view, pointing out that a “typical failure case” for Japanese businesses in Africa has occurred when they attempt to rely on Japanese staff, who often struggle to develop a business network on the continent. “Sometimes it’s a waste of time and wisdom and cost to send Japanese people to the continent,” he says.

More recently, however, the professor says Japanese businesspeople are more likely to invest in local companies, rather than attempting to establish new ventures themselves.

Dealing with risk

Shirato cites the example of &Capital, an Africa-focused impact investment firm established to invest in local companies that was co-founded by prominent Japanese investor Ken Shibusawa following the last TICAD in 2022. JICA has taken a somewhat similar approach with its NINJA Accelerator programme, which helps African start-ups establish partnerships with Japanese companies.

Japanese businesses tend to suffer from a major gap in access to data about African markets. They don’t have the data that’s going to enable them to really make sound decisions, and there is also a deficit in help for Japanese companies to navigate cultural differences

Although the common outside view that Japanese business culture is inherently conservative and risk-averse does not tell the whole story, it does contain at least some element of truth. One of the challenges in encouraging greater levels of Japanese investment in Africa is therefore to find ways to address their concerns over business risks in Africa.

A significant obstacle is the lack of bilateral investment treaties (BITs) between Japan and African governments, warns Markus Burgstaller, a partner at law firm Hogan Lovells. At present, Japan has BITs with only five African governments, namely Angola, Côte d’Ivoire, Mozambique, Egypt and Kenya.

“What the investor always wants is that any disputes are being settled before an international tribunal rather than the host state courts,” says Burgstaller. “One of the beauties of these investment treaties is that if you bring a claim before a tribunal under an investment treaty, you have the international tribunal to apply international law, and not the local law.”

Many Japanese investors can mitigate this problem by investing in Africa via subsidiaries in countries that do have BITs with local governments, such as the UAE or Mauritius. But, in the absence of investment treaties with Japan, Burgstaller adds, Japanese companies have to lean on their ties with the Japanese government to help ensure a dispute can be settled out of court.

Data gaps

Another issue, says Bernard Laurendeau, founder of boutique advisory firm Enkopa Lab, is that Japanese businesses tend to suffer from a “major gap” in access to data about African markets. “They don’t have the data that’s going to enable them to really make sound decisions,” he warns, adding that there is also a deficit in investment bankers and management consultants who can help Japanese companies navigate cultural differences.

But Laurendeau – a French-Ethiopian national who is now based in Tokyo – argues that although Japanese business leaders are often perceived as being slow to make decisions, this reflects how attention to detail is highly valued in Japanese business culture. “If you help that decision-maker with the right amount of data, they will actually deliver that decision quicker than maybe [those in] another geography,” he says.

And while much of the attention in the Japan-Africa relationship focuses on efforts to address Japan’s perception of risk in Africa, Laurendeau reminds us that African governments need to do more to promote their countries to Japanese investors. “There is a bit of a gap in terms of these countries promoting themselves properly,” he says.

The African Development Bank has been active in this regard. In 2012, it chose Tokyo as the location for its first representation office outside Africa. The bank also regularly leads investor delegations to Japan.

Such efforts are a good start, but more work is needed to help the Japan-Africa relationship flourish. “I think most of the ingredients are there for a lot of marriages to happen,” says Laurendeau, “but the groom – if the groom is Africa – needs to show up and promote itself.” ■

Above: Assembly line at the Toyota South Africa manufacturing plant in KwaZulu-Natal.



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Takeharu Yamanaka, Mayor of Yokohama

Yokohama, a Japanese metropolis where a number of global companies have their headquarters and research and development centres, is now preparing to host the Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD) for the fourth time this August. Mayor Yamanaka tells African Business what makes Yokohama an appealing business centre.

TICAD 9 host Yokohama strengthens Africa ties

What is Yokohama doing to attract business?

Yokohama City has always played an important role as a business centre. Many Japanese global enterprises including Nissan Motor, Isuzu Motors, JGC Holdings Corporation, and Chiyoda Corporation have their headquarters in the city.

Our proactive efforts to attract businesses have also paid off with a large presence of international corporations, including names like Bosch, Samsung Electronics, and Caterpillar. Over the past two and a half years our city has received 266.2 billion yen worth of investments, which is more than 70 billion yen above the amount in the preceding four years.

Yokohama's advantages include its close proximity to the Greater Tokyo Area, with its large market of approximately 42m people; easy access to domestic and international destinations; and an abundance of talented human resources thanks to numerous universities and research institutes.

Last November we tapped into our wealth of corporate research labs and engineers by establishing Tech Hub Yokohama as a centre for supporting tech startups.

This initiative seeks to develop an ecosystem that will facilitate the creation of unicorn startups by providing diverse assistance, such as matching with venture capitalists and major corporations in Japan and abroad and support for demonstration testing and overseas business development.

I would also like to note that the foundation of Yokohama's economy is bolstered by some 73,000 small and medium-sized enterprises that offer many unique technologies and products.

Our city government is partnering with these companies to proactively take on the challenge of advancing carbon-neutral decarbonisation business practices.

In conjunction with TICAD 9, we are providing local companies with information on business opportunities in Africa and helping to match them with

African companies, with the goal of contributing to the economic growth of both Africa and Yokohama.

What is the city doing to ensure sustainability?

Yokohama is now working to help bring forth a green society through diverse efforts that have earned international acclaim.

We are seeking to make a difference in our capacity as the "Green Hub of Asia". One of our contributions in this regard is annually hosting the Asia Smart City Conference, an international forum aimed at realising sustainable green communities, for more than ten years.

Minato Mirai 21, Yokohama's central business district, has been selected by the Japanese government as one of the country's Decarbonisation Leading Areas. We are collaborating with the private sector to decarbonise the entire district completely and to visualise the district's resource circularity rate. Projects such as these are rare not only in Japan but also around the world.

Our diverse actions for realising green communities have gained international recognition. This can be seen in my appointment in April 2023 as a board member of the Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy (GCoM; I concurrently serve as representative for East Asia), and as one of the OECD Champion Mayors for Inclusive Growth in October of the same year.

Another major project for our city is hosting Green×Expo 2027. This environmentally-themed international exposition will be held at a venue that will radiate subtle refinement, created by a fusion of seasonal flowers, the greenery of trees and Japanese culture. It will be an opportunity to share with people from around the world an understanding of the challenges of climate change and the importance of preserving the global environment for future generations – and in so doing encourage everyone to take action to address the issues faced.

The international community, including many local and foreign businesses, recognises the importance

'We are helping to match local companies with African companies, with the goal of contributing to the economic growth of both Africa and Yokohama'





of what Green×Expo 2027 seeks to accomplish. We look forward to having many African countries take part in this event and help develop it into a force for achieving the SDGs [UN Sustainable Development Goals] by 2030 and bringing forth a green society.

How is Yokohama sharing its expertise on city planning with Africa and Asia?

Yokohama actively engages in international technical cooperation aimed at solving various urban challenges. To accomplish this we leverage the urban development insights we have amassed over the years and our network with other cities around the globe. We also work together with diverse partners such as international organisations, the Japanese government, the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), and businesses that provide infrastructural and environmental services.

As part of our environmental cooperation, for over ten years we have assisted major Southeast Asian cities in their formulation of climate change action plans and urban development master plans. These cities include Bangkok in Thailand, Metro Cebu in the Philippines, and Da Nang in Vietnam, among others.

We also assist rapidly-growing cities across Africa by sharing Yokohama's technologies and expertise with them. This involves providing technical cooperation mainly in areas such as waste management, waterworks, and port operations. We have organised technical tours and training in our city for more than 1,400 participants from Africa.

Our experience in waterworks-related technical cooperation has a particularly long history, going back nearly half a century to when we first dispatched a city employee to Kenya in 1977.

How are you strengthening ties with Africa in the run-up to TICAD 9?

Along with such cooperation, we have used our role as a thrice-TICAD host to strengthen our bonds with African countries in many different ways. For example, our activities include organising exchanges between African and Yokohama youths who will lead their communities in the near future, helping Yokohama-based companies to develop business opportunities in Africa and supporting African women entrepreneurs.

As mayor I have hosted a number of African ambassadors at the mayor's official residence and at city hall to directly share thoughts and ideas on opportunities for collaboration ahead of the upcoming TICAD 9. Last September, I was invited to a meeting of the African Diplomatic Corps in Tokyo, where I briefed the participants on various policies and initiatives that our city is implementing. The ambassadors I spoke with expressed their hope that TICAD 9 will open the door to even stronger cooperation between their countries and Yokohama, particularly in the area of business.

We warmly invite our friends in Africa and around the world to join us for TICAD 9 in August and Green×Expo 2027 in two years from now. As mayor, I will do everything in my power to further strengthen our partnerships with organisations and communities around the world, support Africa's sustainable growth, and increase the global presence of Yokohama. ■

*Horiuchi Toshihiko, assistant minister and director general for African affairs of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, explains how Japan's engagement with the continent is evolving and tells **Mohamed Ali Aboudi** about the TICAD 9 agenda.*

We aim to ensure TICAD 9 is a new milestone in Japan-Africa relations

What are Japan's main objectives for TICAD 9 in terms of strengthening its partnerships with African countries, considering Japan's significant role in Africa's development over the past years and the increasing competition from the US, European, and Asian nations? Which specific sectors or industries will Japan prioritise in its co-operation with African nations, particularly in areas such as investment, infrastructure, technology, and innovation?

TICAD is not merely a bilateral platform between Africa and Japan. It is rather a multilateral forum and platform. For example, TICAD includes multilateral partners with co-organisers such as the African Union Commission, the UN Development Programme (UNDP), the UN Office of the Special Adviser on Africa and the World Bank. While Japan is a driving force to organise TICAD, its essence lies in multilateral partnerships, fostering exchanges of views, bringing and catalysing new ideas and opportunities for collaboration. Japan strives to stand out by strengthening TICAD's uniqueness: its inclusiveness, multilateral nature, and openness.

Now, returning to your question on Japan's diplomatic engagement with Africa: we have been supporting regional integration and cooperation in the continent while taking a tailor-made approach in respective countries and regions. TICAD tries to address the interrelation of peace and security, economic development, and social development. Our overarching vision is to promote human-centred prosperity through a sustainable and inclusive economic system.

For example, Japan has been implementing various projects worldwide through JICA (Japan International Cooperation Agency). For TICAD 9, our approach is to co-create initiatives together with our African partners, while also engaging with interested global stakeholders to mobilise resources, including domestic resource mobilisation for implementing and scaling innovative ideas and projects. We aim

to share best practices and collectively generate impactful solutions.

Regarding societal development, Japan, despite having limited natural resources, has always prioritised human capital development.

From this perspective, investment in people including our support for improved access to education and health services, namely realisation of universal health coverage (UHC), remains one of our main priorities. We also promote innovation by drawing on technologies and ideas alike. Our projects are aligned with these priorities.

In parallel, we emphasise human security, a concept and guiding principle for development that focuses on every individual being able to realise a life free of fear and want.

However, we remain humble and recognise that our past achievements should not make us complacent. It is essential to listen to African countries and their people to fully grasp their evolving needs and challenges including more effective use of innovation such as digital technologies and AI.

Given Japan's past achievements in Africa, how do you see the future of Japan-Africa relations, particularly as Africa is projected to have the youngest and largest population in the world?

Africa's demographic transformation is remarkable. I often highlight two key observations: Africa is one, yet diverse. While the continent is integrating, especially under the African Union's leadership, it remains deeply diverse; and secondly, in 2050 one-third of the world's youth population between 15 and 24 years old will be African.

This makes Africa an immediate and strategic partner for the global community, including Japan. No global solutions will be conceivable without meaningful participation of African people, particularly youth. We need more inclusive global governance, sharing

'Japan aims to co-create innovative, inclusive, and sustainable solutions with Africa – prioritising investment in people, technology, and infrastructure – while strengthening TICAD's unique multilateral and human-centred approach'



Tokyo International Conference on African Development

more responsibility with Africa to find common grounds and co-create solutions for global challenges.

We try to correctly understand Africa and to align with the African Union Agenda 2063 and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Our credo is that our ideas should be, to the extent possible, substantiated with human capital development programmes and collaboration with the private sector that promotes homegrown and self-sustained solutions.

In the past Japan contributed to Africa's prosperity through various development programmes, which were the focus of TICAD in the first place. As times have changed, so have the themes at TICAD. African countries then added new aspirations such as business, investment, trade, industrialisation and employment. So we have reflected this shifting focus in the TICAD agenda. But on top of that, what I have in mind for TICAD 9 is to put forward this new spirit and modus operandi: co-creation of innovative solutions together, so that we can tackle both African priorities and the global issues together with solutions-oriented outcomes in mind.

We have also been prioritising empowerment and

'TICAD 9 marks a new era of co-creation – where Japan and Africa work hand in hand to craft innovative, homegrown solutions, driven by shared values, inclusive growth, and a commitment to shaping global progress together'

unleashing the potential of youth and women. One key initiative is the ABE Initiative (African Business Education Initiative for Youth), which provides youths from Africa with opportunities to study business and industry know-how and gain internships in Japanese companies. These youths serve as crucial bridges between Africa and Japan, fostering long-term economic and cultural ties. This initiative, which has been in existence for the last ten years, embodies our commitment to youth mobility and human capital development. That said, the relationship between Japan and Africa is becoming more multi-layered. We seek to diversify and expand our exchange programmes between Japan and African countries including some new opportunities in mutually developing cultural exchanges and the potential of more cooperation in the creative industry.

What strategies will be employed to encourage more Japanese companies to invest in Africa, particularly in industries critical to both economic and social development?

Inclusive and sustainable economic growth is key to achieving a prosperous Africa. Japan is adopting a multi-pronged approach. Firstly, by enhancing information access to opportunities in Africa. One of the main barriers for Japanese businesses is the difficulty in obtaining accurate information about African markets and industrial ecosystems. Japan is working to bridge this gap through embassies, JETRO (Japan External Trade Organization), JICA

and business networks. In this regard, cooperation from African countries to ensure open, rule-based predictable and level-playing markets and disclose accurate information on the business environment including taxation and regulations, is key. Secondly, by providing financial and risk mitigation tools to incentivise companies to help decide strategic investment in Africa by localising Japanese technologies and know-how. Japan is strengthening accompanying mechanisms such as support for feasibility studies and trade insurance through institutions like NEXI (Nippon Export and Investment Insurance) to reduce business uncertainties. Thirdly, together with African countries and institutions, we continue to promote an inclusive and sustainable ecosystem with flourishing private sector and caring governance for people.

Additionally, we are facilitating public-private partnerships (PPPs) and promoting sustainable finance and investment in key sectors, including high-quality infrastructure in the renewable energy and water sectors, in which the Japanese private sector shows its strong interest. We are also paying special attention to promoting small and medium-sized



enterprises (SMEs) and startups to explore African markets. In this regard, I am encouraged by Japanese young entrepreneurs' many innovative ideas to develop new African-born business solutions to economic and social challenges.

How does Japan plan to enhance its trade and investment relations with Africa, and what are the expected outcomes in terms of increasing Japan's economic footprint?

Japan needs Africa, just as Africa needs Japan. Africa is becoming increasingly important as a market, supplier, and investment destination for Japan. Given Africa's growing young population and economic potential, Japan aims to expand bilateral investment treaties (BITs) with African nations. Japan has already concluded BITs with Egypt, Mozambique, Kenya, Morocco, Côte d'Ivoire and Angola. We have signed a BIT with Zambia, and are looking to extend these further, supporting the implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), recognising its potential as a game-changer in regional trade integration and to encourage Japanese companies to establish stronger value chains in Africa, ensuring

Below: Horiuchi Toshihiko, assistant minister and director general for African affairs of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, at the Dakar Financing Summit for Africa's Infrastructure Development.

sustainable economic collaboration. With regional integration in progress, Africa can be more connected, industrialised, and value-added within and beyond the continent, and can expect more value-added trade of African-made products to other regions including the Indo-Pacific. We need to nurture maritime connectivity and cross-regional value-chains, and mobility of human capital and technologies. Africa will become a centre of gravity of the world economy and global trends. Africa will be a new provider of solutions. We have to learn more from Africa.

Given current global challenges and geopolitical tensions, how will Japan continue to support African countries in areas such as peace and security, sustainability, green growth, education, and capacity-building?

Japan firmly believes in co-creating innovative solutions with Africa and the global community. Africa is the most left-behind and suffers the most from numerous global challenges, from climate change to security issues. This situation can be an opportunity for Africa to develop home-grown, future-oriented and innovative solutions. Japan's approach can include supporting such African-led solutions through partnerships with the AU peace and security operations and UN peacekeeping operations, investing in green energy such as hydrogen and renewable, sustainable environmental resilience such as circular waste management and disaster prevention projects; and strengthening vocational training, university collaborations in human exchanges and joint scientific researches, and skill development initiatives.

What are the long-term expectations from TICAD 9, and what measurable outcomes can Africa anticipate?

TICAD 9 marks a shift toward mutual learning and co-creation. Japan aims to move beyond traditional aid models by focusing on solution-oriented and business-driven partnerships, enhancing knowledge-sharing to leverage Africa's indigenous expertise and co-develop solutions to global challenges, thus ensuring Africa's increasingly critical role in shaping the future. Japan is committed to further strengthening cooperation with African countries to strengthen global governance and resolve global issues.

How do you plan to effectively communicate TICAD 9's vision to African stakeholders to ensure broad participation and impact?

Japan's message is clear: "Let's do it together, 'made with Japan'; let's make a solution with 'made with Japan'. Make an innovation happen with 'made with Japan'."

In the past, Japan was known for "Made in Japan" products, but today, it is about collaborating to co-create shared value. Japanese expertise in technology, disciplined human capital development such as the *Kaizen* ("continuous improvement" in Japanese) concept and innovation is available for Africa.

Through strategic communication, partnerships and media outreach, we aim to ensure that TICAD 9 marks a new milestone in Japan-Africa relations and strengthening cooperation-based multilateralism at a changing global environment, feeding into the outcomes of the first-ever African G20 Summit in South Africa. ■



Tokyo International Conference on African Development

A key focus at this year's Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD), much as it has been at previous events, is channelling Japanese investment into African infrastructure. Japan is, in theory, an ideal partner for African countries looking to develop their energy, transport and telecommunications infrastructure. Japan's largest financial institutions mostly have healthy balance sheets and are looking to invest in projects that deliver long-term returns. Japanese investors are also often in a position to offer capital on relatively attractive terms, given low domestic

Japanese investors have been careful about African infrastructure, but a growing number are exploring opportunities, writes Ben Payton.

Building Japan-Africa ties in infrastructure

interest rates. Progress has been made in fostering cooperation. At the previous TICAD in 2022, Japan announced a target to invest \$30bn from the public and private sectors in Africa, with much of this sum destined for infrastructure projects. The Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs claimed in a report last year that it “remains on track” to achieve this goal.

Yet the reality is that Japan's role in African infrastructure development has been overshadowed by some of its geopolitical competitors.

Whereas Chinese construction teams have long been a common sight across Africa, with many high-profile projects funded and developed by Chinese state-backed companies, Japan has taken on a far less conspicuous role.

There is still a “lack of understanding” among Japanese companies of the risks and opportunities available in the infrastructure sector in Africa, says Airi Ikedo, strategy director at Index Strategy, a project management firm that specialises in public-private partnerships (PPPs) in infrastructure. “Whenever we have an initial discussion with a Japanese company, one of the reasons why they are not willing to enter the African market is basically the distance from Japan.”

Improving understanding and addressing misperceptions will be vital if Japan-Africa infrastructure ties are to blossom.

Building bridges

Perhaps the most famous Japanese project in Africa is the Freedom Bridge over the Nile at Juba, which opened in 2022. Prior to construction, residents of the South Sudanese capital had relied on a single ramshackle crossing. The new \$91m arched steel bridge was funded by JICA, the Japan International Cooperation Agency. Japanese company Dai Nippon



Construction was the main contractor, while the works were overseen by another Japanese company, CTI Engineering International.

This is one of several infrastructure projects that have involved Japanese private sector companies working closely with JICA, or with other Japanese public bodies such as the Japan Bank for International Cooperation.

Ikedo tells *African Business* that the Japanese government has begun trying to promote PPPs over the past decade. JICA has a scheme called Private Sector Investment Finance, in which it allocates funds to help cover the cost of feasibility studies for Japanese companies that are willing to invest in projects.

Index Strategy is currently working on a PPP road construction project in Ghana, which originated from a memorandum of understanding signed between the Ghanaian and Japanese governments following the 2019 TICAD. A feasibility study is now complete, and Index Strategy has arranged a consortium that includes Japanese engineering company Maeda Corporation alongside partners from Portugal and Ghana.

The consortium hopes to sign a “basic agreement” at this year’s TICAD, which would serve as the foundation for contract negotiations ahead of construction on the first phase of the project beginning next year.

Ikedo believes more Japanese companies will eventually become involved in infrastructure projects in Africa – but she adds that patience is needed.

“It will take time, and we believe that we need a successful case,” she says, adding that a lack of proven successes in PPP projects is a hindrance in persuading Japanese companies to invest in infrastructure.

Critical minerals

One of the other promising areas for Japan-Africa cooperation is around the so-called critical minerals that are vital for digital technologies and energy systems. Japan, as a major industrial country that lacks significant mineral resources of its own, is dependent on the import of raw materials. Securing this supply is a key priority, given the dependence of strategic industries such as shipbuilding, electronics and semiconductor manufacturing on critical minerals.

The Japan Organization for Metals and Energy Security (JOGMEC) signed agreements with Namibia, DR Congo and Zambia in 2023 as it aims to secure investment opportunities for Japanese companies around developing critical minerals.

Ankit Khandelwal, head of Africa for sovereigns, development finance institutions (DFIs) and blended finance at MUFG Bank, says that major Japanese players are eager to invest in the sector.

“There’s a focus, a desire, an interest from Japanese trade houses to look at investing in natural resources, in critical mineral assets,” he says. “And when you have a natural resource investment, especially in the mining sector, you also have the associated infrastructure that needs to be built around

it. And I think that’s where the investment is also going through.” Khandelwal believes Japan will not want to miss out to its geopolitical rivals in the race to strengthen security of supply. “Given the focus we have seen from some of the other regional powers – the US, China and so on – I’m confident that there will be Japanese investment going into this space as well,” he says.

The Lobito Corridor, which links mining operations in DR Congo with rail and port infrastructure passing through Angola, could be a model that Japan seeks to emulate. The United States committed to rehabilitating infrastructure along the corridor under the Biden administration. The scheme “is a perfect example of what can be achieved if you’re supported by government,” says Khandelwal. “That was a US-centric project rather than a Japan-centric project. But that could be a template of how we can look at these projects.”

Final frontier for infrastructure

As well as projects in the more traditional types of energy and transport infrastructure, Japan is also a major player in the digital and satellite technologies that are increasingly vital to delivering essential services. Indeed, the country’s famous tech prowess means Japanese companies are well-positioned at the intersection of infrastructure and technology.

One example is Japanese company Space Shift, which uses artificial intelligence to deliver insights from multiple types of high-resolution satellite imagery. This includes data from synthetic aperture radar satellites, which carry out observations based on reflected information captured by radio waves. “For us, Africa is a very big opportunity,” says Naruo Kanemoto, the company’s CEO. “It’s a frontier for us to expand.”

Kanemoto says that a key use case in Africa is its ability to monitor agricultural land. It is currently working on a project in Nigeria, for example, that monitors farmers’ historic land-use.

This information is used to help farmers receive a credit score, which they can use in microfinance assessments.

Crop growth monitoring via satellite can also be used to help predict seasonal yields. Authorities can use this information to provide advice to farmers on crop selection and harvest and planting times.

Space Shift has received support from JETRO, the Japan External Trade Organization, as it looks for business partners in Africa. “We cannot expand our business just by ourselves in Africa,” says Kanemoto. “There’s the culture barrier, the language barrier.” Working with local partners to deliver technology to customers in Africa will be key to its future success, he says.

Ultimately, Kanemoto is convinced that Japanese technology delivered with the help of space infrastructure will be eagerly received in Africa. “I can feel the thirst for new technology,” he says. ■



The \$91m arched steel Freedom Bridge in Juba was funded by JICA, the Japan International Cooperation Agency

Top: The completed Freedom Bridge, with the flags of Japan and South Sudan displayed.

Opposite: The inauguration of the Ivorian-Japanese financed Solibra junction interchange on the outskirts of Abidjan.

*Tokyo is rarely at the forefront of investing in African energy systems, but there is scope to power-up the relationship. writes **Ben Payton**.*

Japan casts a cautious eye towards Africa's energy resources

Japan has, since the mid-nineteenth century, risen to become one of the world's most industrialised countries. Its rise is all the more remarkable because the island nation has very limited domestic supplies of the natural resources that have typically powered industrial growth in other parts of the world. Today, Japan imports virtually all of the oil, natural gas and coal that together make up almost 85% of its energy supply.

Japan has traditionally relied on the Middle East for its oil imports, while Australia is its main source of liquefied natural gas (LNG). But as the country continues to wrestle with its never-ending energy security issue, it has begun to look at African markets as options for diversifying supply. Last June, for example, the Nigerian National Petroleum Company (NNPC) shipped LNG to Japan for the first time.

And, as it looks to the future, Japan is increasingly interested in exploring the uses of green hydrogen and green ammonia. This is where a partnership with Africa has the potential to be a game-changer.

Mixed fortunes in Mozambique

The African energy development that has seen the greatest Japanese involvement is undoubtedly the LNG project offshore from Mozambique. A joint venture between Japanese trading house Mitsui and the state-owned Japan Oil, Gas and Metals National Corporation (JOGMEC) holds a 20% stake in the Area 1 block operated by TotalEnergies.

The Japan Bank for International Cooperation, a publicly-owned financial institution, signed off a \$3bn loan for the project in 2020 as part of an international consortium. Several of Japan's largest



private banks, including MUFG Bank, Mizuho Bank, Sumitomo Mitsui Banking Corporation (SMBC) and Sumitomo Mitsui Trust Bank, also participated in the consortium, while Nippon Export and Investment Insurance provided loan insurance.

When (or if) the LNG finally starts flowing, around 30% of Area 1 gas will be destined for Japanese utility companies under offtake agreements already signed.

“The purpose of Japan’s investment in Mozambique’s LNG project is to diversify its sources of natural gas imports,” says Masahide Takahashi, a senior research fellow at the Middle East Institute of Japan.

“The advantage of importing from Mozambique is that it avoids the Strait of Hormuz, a choke point,” he adds, noting that Japan remains “extremely concerned” that a blockade of the narrow strait in the Gulf could cause a repeat of the 1970s energy crisis.

Yet if Japanese investors saw Mozambique LNG as a test case for involvement in major African energy projects, they are surely concerned by the results. Total was forced to declare force majeure on the \$20bn scheme in 2021 due to the insurgency in Cabo Delgado province – the kind of event that would seem to confirm the worst fears of those who perceive Africa as a high-risk environment.

Total is thought to be preparing to finally lift force majeure after the security situation improved and the US Export-Import Bank reapproved a loan. Several Japanese companies, including Chiyoda Corporation, will be involved in constructing onshore facilities once work does resume. But, with the project now years behind schedule, gas deliveries are not expected until 2030 at the earliest.

Renewables

While LNG producers in West or North Africa can supply the Japanese market, the distances involved in shipments make these regions less attractive to Japanese buyers. Outside Mozambique, there are few signs of Japanese companies or investors looking for opportunities in oil and gas projects in Africa.

“Japanese private companies see investing in the upstream energy sector in Africa as a relatively high-risk project,” says Takahashi. “I don’t think that African countries other than Mozambique will become important energy suppliers for Japan.”

Beyond oil and gas, there is a modest degree of Japanese involvement in renewable energy projects in Africa.

JICA, the Japan International Cooperation Agency, has provided loans for multiple green power projects in recent years. In November 2024, for example, it joined SMBC in providing a \$150m loan to the Development Bank of Southern Africa for renewable projects in South Africa. Takehiro Yasui, JICA’s director-general for private sector partnership, said at the time that the loan could promote “further collaboration with partners in Southern Africa.”

Sometimes, though, the Japanese presence can go almost unnoticed. For example, Japanese companies are among the largest manufacturers of the turbines used in geothermal power stations in Kenya. Mitsubishi Heavy Industries has been supplying turbines to power plants in the Olkaria field since the 1980s, while Toyota Tsusho Corporation is the construction

contractor for a new power station currently being built in the Menengai field.

Green hydrogen dreams

Nigerian-born Junaid Belo-Osagie occupies a position as one of the most senior African individuals working in a Japanese financial institution. And Belo-Osagie, the executive director for investment banking in Europe, the Middle East and Africa at Mizuho Bank, believes the Japan-Africa energy relationship can grow much deeper.

“Japan itself is geologically challenged and is geographically constrained to actually produce the clean energy that it needs,” he tells *African Business*. He notes that the country has ambitious plans to increase consumption of green hydrogen and ammonia, which it sees as crucial for its decarbonisation agenda, but will have to rely mainly on imports. “This is where there’s an intersection with Africa,” says Belo-Osagie. “Africa, on paper, essentially has huge amounts of renewable resources in wind and [solar] power, and naturally is a place that Japan should look to in terms of offtake of the energy that Japan needs.”

Several African countries are very well-placed to produce green hydrogen and ammonia on a large scale, due to the excellent conditions for solar and wind power. So far, however, African projects have struggled to compete with international rivals.

The biggest “pain point”, Belo-Osagie says, is the high cost of capital in Africa. He notes research by consultancy McKinsey finding that a 6% drop in the cost of capital could reduce the costs of hydrogen, “levelised” over the lifetime of the project, by 50%. African hydrogen developers, therefore, desperately need access to cheaper capital – and this is where Belo-Osagie believes Japan can help.

While Japan could be a source of concessional capital – reflecting very low interest rates in the country – Belo-Osagie argues that policy support from Japan could be even more transformative. He suggests that the Japanese government could extend its “contract for difference” programme, in which it subsidises domestic hydrogen producers by guaranteeing a minimum price, to Africa. “A number of us are having conversations ahead of TICAD” around such a scheme, he says.

This would mean, in practice, that Japan would subsidise African green hydrogen producers – while their profits would also be capped – in return for guaranteed supply to Japan. Belo-Osagie estimates that payback would be achieved after around 15 years as the initial subsidies help the industry to scale and deliver cheaper resources.

The TICAD summit will provide an opportunity to gauge the Japanese government’s level of interest in a mechanism along these lines. While it remains to be seen whether the country will emerge as a major partner for green hydrogen development, Belo-Osagie does believe a “mutually beneficial relationship” can flourish.

“Japan, just by dint of its culture, understands that in many of these two-way engagements, it’s a long-term investment,” he says. “There is no better country when it comes to taking a long-term view on things than Japan. So, there is hope.” ■

‘Africa naturally is a place that Japan should look to in terms of offtake of the energy that it needs’

Opposite: Japanese companies are among the largest manufacturers of turbines used in geothermal power stations, such as the power plants in the Olkaria field in Kenya.



Ankit Khandelwal, Director of Africa Coverage, MUFG Corporate Banking Division

MUFG's Ankit Khandelwal tells Ben Payton that blended finance is vital to scaling-up investment in the continent.

Expanding Africa's investor base

Japan's Mitsubishi UFJ Financial Group – better known as MUFG – is one of the giants of the banking world. It took its modern form in 2005 following a series of mergers that made the group the largest financial institution in Japan, but traces its origins to the nineteenth century. And the bank has expanded well beyond Japan's shores, having established a worldwide presence.

In Africa, a key focus for MUFG is its work with sovereign funds and development finance institutions.

"For the sovereigns especially, we focus on arranging long tenor financing for a range of their infrastructure requirements," says Ankit Khandelwal, MUFG's head of Africa for sovereigns, development finance institutions (DFIs) and blended finance. "And this is where our blended finance platform is the key catalyst for us to do a lot of the transactions."

The blended finance approach involves establishing fund structures in which some investors – typically DFIs or other providers of concessional finance – contribute "first loss capital". Fully commercial investors can then invest in the same investment fund while bearing less risk.

In Africa, MUFG's blended finance platform seems to illustrate the potential of this approach. "We started this in 2018. And over the last seven years now, we've raised around €7bn (\$8bn) in financing for a range of infrastructure projects or sovereign financing," says Khandelwal. "In each one of those transactions, we've brought in new sources of liquidity. So, from a government's perspective, they're getting competitive financing, long tenor, but strategically they're also getting new investors who traditionally would not lend to one of these sovereigns."

Making blended finance work

The blended finance approach can be helpful in expanding the pool of investors willing to take a bet on Africa. "In the larger transactions, where we are looking to syndicate, our intention is to bring in non-bank liquidity," Khandelwal explains. He points out that building a road requires loans extending over up to 20 years – far longer than would typically be available from a bank. This makes it vital to bring in longer-term investors, such as pension funds.

"We, as a global powerhouse, with a global distribution platform, aim to bring in investors who

haven't traditionally focused on Africa from a risk profile perspective. And the way we bring them in is to credit enhance the transaction to meet their risk criteria, which allows them to deploy long tenor financing for these projects."

This means, in practice, that MUFG typically includes risk mitigation structures in the transactions it arranges, usually through working with multilateral institutions such as the World Bank or the African Development Bank, or export credit agencies (ECAs) such as UK Export Finance or Japan's Nippon Export and Investment Insurance.

"I think there's a lot more interest from investors who want to deploy their liquidity in assets that are developmental in nature, but also meet their risk criteria," Khandelwal says.

"And as we've worked with more investors, we understand better what they're looking for, and we've managed to use that information to engage with the multilateral stakeholders and the ECA stakeholders to fine tune the policies to attract more liquidity. It's an iterative process."

Japanese investment

Although MUFG works with investors globally, it is naturally well-positioned in the Japanese market. Khandelwal says that there is substantial interest among Japanese investors around opportunities in Africa.

"We've done a couple of transactions that were fully distributed in Japan. And this is not a new phenomenon," he says. "Japanese investors are looking at broadening the jurisdictions they go into, and as we see more Japanese corporates, more Japanese government support for transactions on the continent, you'll see a lot more Japanese investors following them."

Khandelwal says that MUFG has engaged proactively with Japanese investors to educate them about opportunities and risks in African markets. And while Japanese investors are often perceived as being highly conservative, Khandelwal believes they are not inherently more risk averse than institutional investors from other countries.

"As people get more familiar with the actual risk profile on offer, they get more comfortable," he says. "The barriers that we assumed we would face, whether it's for Japanese investors or non-Japanese, were very



'The blended finance approach will be critical. For us, it's the catalyst for bringing access to the large liquidity pools that exist globally, in America, Europe and Asia'

similar in terms of the risk perception of Africa, especially when you're talking about pension funds and insurance companies from the UK or Europe investing in those markets."

Engaging with investors and educating them on the risk-reward equation in Africa has brought progress, he says. "There's still a lot of work to do – by no means are we anywhere close to where we want to be, but at least the momentum has certainly increased a lot for Japanese debt investors."

Future challenges

The current macroeconomic environment, both in Africa and globally, is of course highly uncertain at present, not least due to US tariff policies that have thrown markets into chaos.

"The current market volatility, which is really trade related, doesn't have huge implications for our strategy," he says, while acknowledging that the timing of transactions could be impacted by volatility. "What our clients, both sovereigns and the corporate clients who are active in Africa, are looking for from us is to provide long term financing for their long-term projects. So the current market volatility will not have huge implications in terms of their rollout of the projects."

He does add, though, that the likelihood of a drastic decline in official development assistance to Africa – with the Trump administration gutting the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and other important donor nations also reprioritising aid spending – means the private sector needs to take a greater role in confronting development challenges.

"There's clearly an opportunity for the private sector, with the support of the public sector, to help fill part of the financing gap and the infrastructure gap," he says. "Our blended finance platform is one of the solutions to help navigate that."

During the pandemic MUFG arranged a \$520m loan facility for Afreximbank, which used the proceeds for trade-related investments that helped mitigate Covid-19's economic impacts. This was followed with a second facility in March 2022 that was designed to help fund the Covid vaccine rollout in Africa.

Khandelwal believes there could be similar arrangements in the future. "The format may be slightly different – the Afreximbank transaction was a response to the situation we were in at the time – but ultimately, the narrative is still to support countries where they need to invest in the social infrastructure that is needed on the continent."

In the longer term, he is convinced blended finance will play a major role in catalysing investment in the continent. "The blended finance approach will be critical. For us, it's the catalyst for bringing access to the large liquidity pools that exist globally, in America, Europe and Asia."

"We are the start of the journey," Khandelwal says. "We are going to do more blended finance in the next two years than we did in the previous five years. I think as more entities, both private sector investors and multilateral and ECAs, support this approach – which they certainly do, based on the conversations we're having – this will provide a solution that's very much needed on the continent." ■

Zimbabwe

*Speculation over the future of President Emmerson Mnangagwa introduces a further element of uncertainty into an economy battling for recovery, reports **Farai Shawn Matiashe**.*



Zimbabwe's succession battle complicates growth push



A succession battle is simmering within the ruling party in Zimbabwe, resulting in further uncertainty for businesses in an already fragile economy. President Emmerson Mnangagwa's allies reportedly want to amend the constitution to extend his term by at least two years, while a rival faction is backing vice president Constantino Chiwenga to take over.

Business in Harare came to a grinding halt on 31 March after Blessed Geza, a former ZANU-PF central committee member, called for nationwide mass protests against Mnangagwa. The call by Geza, a Chiwenga ally, shut down Zimbabwe's capital Harare, with businesses closed and streets deserted.

Hundreds of people took to the streets and barricaded roads while singing songs against the 2030 Agenda, the alleged plot to extend Mnangagwa's term by at least two years. Over 100 were arrested and charged with participating in unsanctioned demonstrations.

Zimbabwe has not had mass protests since 2019, when several were killed when the military was deployed to quell demonstrators who took to the streets in the wake of 150% fuel price hikes. Mnangagwa, who last won re-election in August 2023, is currently serving his second and final term, which is due to end in 2028. The president has several times denied that he wishes to remove term limits.

A former commander of the Zimbabwe Defence Forces, Chiwenga played a key role in a military coup that toppled longtime ruler Robert Mugabe in November 2017 and propelled Mnangagwa to power.

Chiwenga supporter Geza appeared in the media last month, accusing Mnangagwa of corruption and economic mismanagement.

On 3 April Geza said he was pushing to impeach Mnangagwa based on ill health; this move is highly unlikely to succeed given that the president controls Parliament.

A fragile recovery

The political instability could knock Zimbabwe's always-fragile business confidence. The World Bank anticipates 6% economic growth in 2025, driven by recovery from last year's El Niño droughts, increased investments in mining and tourism and improved fiscal stability.

Finance minister Mthuli Ncube has expressed confidence that the country will achieve the growth projections, and cites efforts in agriculture, mineral beneficiation – particularly of platinum group metals (PGMs) and lithium – and tight control of government finances.

In recent months the government made

a significant step towards securing future financial support from international lenders when it agreed to compensate foreign farmers covered by bilateral investment treaties whose farms were seized in the controversial and violent land reform programme of the early 2000s.

The country is reportedly looking for sponsors to help clear some \$21bn in historical debt arrears, which would help to unlock fresh financial support.

But ordinary Zimbabweans continue to grapple with food insecurity, dilapidated infrastructure, and average consumer price inflation that the IMF projects will



Above: Zimbabwe's Vice-President, Constantino Chiwenga.

Opposite: Zimbabwe President Emmerson Mnangagwa (centre) inspects the guard of honour at the country's 43rd Independence Day celebrations.

hit 23.6% this year. Zimbabwe replaced its ailing local currency in April last year with another currency dubbed Zimbabwe Gold (ZiG), backed by \$550m in gold and foreign reserves. But the central bank devalued the new currency by 43% in September 2024.

Denford Mutashu, president of the Confederation of Zimbabwe Retailers (CZR), says the government's projection of 6% economic growth in 2025, anchored on recovery in agriculture and mining, is cautiously optimistic, but adds that structural challenges threaten to undermine these ambitions. "Electricity shortages and high production costs persist, as evidenced by the closure of some businesses," he says.

Choppies, a regional supermarket chain, exited Zimbabwe in January, citing a harsh economic environment dominated by informal businesses and a volatile currency. A once-prosperous clothing retailer, Truworths, was sold for a nominal sum after entering a corporate rescue process, while another supermarket, OK, has closed several branches across the country amid a struggle to restock.

Farai Mutambanengwe, chief executive officer at the Small-to-Medium Enterprises

Association of Zimbabwe, says economic growth projections by the government are not in sync with reality.

"It has become increasingly difficult to assess or agree with the gross domestic product (GDP) estimates that are pronounced by the Ministry of Finance, as they are tending to be divergent with the lived reality and experience on the ground."

"We have now had several years where GDP numbers indicate growth, yet we are faced with a collapsing formal sector, increasing informalisation and falling domestic demand," Mutambanengwe says.

Could metals be the silver bullet?

Against this difficult backdrop, finance minister Ncube has pointed to the possibility of developing a lucrative metals industry based on the country's lithium and PGM resources.

Mutashu agrees that over-reliance on raw mineral exports without value addition has left the economy vulnerable to commodity price volatility. Last year, major falls in platinum prices forced companies to retrench workers and close some mines.

"Mining sector growth should prioritise local beneficiation to retain value and jobs domestically," he says.

The government moved to ban exports of unprocessed raw lithium in 2022, although illegal smuggling persists.

Some lithium companies, including Chinese-owned Zhejiang Huayou Cobalt, Sinomine Resource Group and Chengxin Lithium Group, have invested in constructing lithium processing plants.

The country's intermittent power supply is another challenge that must be overcome if a local metals industry is to become a serious contributor to growth. In 2023, China's ambassador to Zimbabwe, Zhou Ding, said that power shortages and high energy prices are a major block to the manufacture of battery-grade lithium.

Fundamental change required

With so many challenges facing the economy, the uncertainty over the political succession is unlikely to be welcomed by investors.

Yet without further impetus towards political reform, the country is also unlikely to see major progress on remedying its longstanding difficulties.

Lyle Begbie, an economist at Oxford Economics Africa, says that Zimbabwe faces several institutional challenges that hinder the widespread distribution of economic benefits.

"Without fundamental political changes, sustained economic growth outside of the extractive sector remains unlikely," he says. ■

Sudan

After two years of devastating civil war the country faces inflation, famine and little sign of an end to hostilities, reports **Bianca Carrera Espriu.**



Sudan's economy shattered by two years of war

Two years after the start of Sudan's devastating civil war, the price of essential food items in some areas of the country has spiralled and tens of millions are struggling to afford basic provisions. According to the IMF the inflation rate based on average consumer prices is expected to hit 118.9% this year, following 200% last year.

In the city of Port Sudan, a safer part of the country where many Sudanese from elsewhere have accumulated, one kilogram of meat now sells for 26,000 Sudanese pounds (\$43). Before the war, it was at 12,000 Sudanese pounds (\$20). Basic commodities such as rice, beans and sugar are difficult to find in the city and have also spiked in price.

UNICEF executive director Catherine Russell told the UN Security Council in March that Sudan "is now the largest and the most devastating humanitarian crisis in the world," with some 30 million requiring humanitarian assistance this

Below: A man sells *Misbaha*, Muslim prayer necklaces, at the market in Wad Madani, the capital of Sudan's al-Jazirah state.

Opposite: Passengers fleeing from Sudan arrive at Wadi Karkar bus station in Aswan, Egypt.



year, more than half of whom are children.

"The rise in prices, soaring inflation rates, and the collapse of the market value of the Sudanese currency are primarily due to the paralysis of productive sectors and the state's increasing reliance on revenues from the mineral sector to keep the government running and cover the costs of war," Mohamed Elhadi, a political activist, tells *African Business*.

After two years of war between government forces led by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and a powerful military faction known as the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), led by his former deputy General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, there is no immediate end in sight. In late March the Sudanese army secured a significant victory when it drove RSF troops from the capital Khartoum. On 15 April G7 foreign ministers called for an immediate and unconditional ceasefire in Sudan and condemned attacks by both sides.

Productive areas targeted in hostilities

A report from the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), published in March 2024, showed national cereal production at 46% below 2023 levels and 40% below the five-year average.

Data provided by World Vision's *Price Shocks 2025* survey suggests that, in Sudan, the required labour time for an average person to afford 10 basic food items has increased by 42% since last year. According to the UN World Food Programme (WFP), famine has been confirmed in more than 10 locations in Sudan; another 17 are on the brink.

Hostilities between Sudan's warring factions have led to the destruction of swathes of farmland, indirectly as a result of the displacement of farmers and rising fuel and fertiliser prices, and directly through the targeting of agricultural land and markets by combatants.

Insecurity Insight reported earlier this year that in Gezira state, which used to produce half of all wheat in Sudan, RSF forces have forcibly taken crops and fertilisers on a large scale since they took control of the state capital in 2023. One of the biggest flour and bread factories was targeted by shelling only a week after the start of the war. In Darfur and Kordofan, states the same report, livestock were looted or forcibly taken at least 85 times between 15 April 2023 and 30 November 2024.

At least 236 incidents affecting markets were recorded between April 2023 and No-

vember 2024 – including 64 incidents in which markets were struck by aircraft- or drone-delivered explosive weapons. The majority of these attacks were attributed to the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) in Khartoum state. In a further 40 incidents markets were struck by artillery fire or other forms of shelling, with responsibility for



'Some people return to Sudan and soon after they come back to Egypt again. Here you can work and pay for your rent and your food, whereas over there in Sudan, you cannot do it nowadays. A lot of people have ended up living in the street'

them split between the SAF and RSF; the majority of these attacks, too, occurred in Khartoum state.

Infrastructure damage and fuel shortages have further reduced what remains of industrial productivity in the cities of Khartoum, Bahri, and Omdurman, where most of the country's factories and workshops are located.

The Red Cross reported growing use of drone attacks by warring parties on hospitals, electricity and water infrastructure. The forestry sector has also been impacted.

"The sector, especially in Kordofan and Blue Nile, which contributes significantly through gum Arabic (Sudan supplies over 70% of the world's demand), has been effectively shut down due to conflict. Key export sectors have hence been paralysed, leading to a significant decline in foreign exchange earnings," says Elhadi.

In this context, international and local aid groups are providing essential safety nets to Sudan's population. At a London conference in mid-April, the European Union and member states pledged \$592m to address the crisis, and the UK announced an extra \$158m in aid.

However, aid agencies' reliance on donor funding leaves them vulnerable to pol-

icy changes. In 2024 the US was the largest single donor of humanitarian aid to Sudan. Some experts fear that US President Donald Trump's 90-day freeze on aid – which was followed by the announcement that around 80% of USAID programmes will be scrapped – could impact fund availability.

When the 90-day freeze on US aid was announced, aid volunteers told the BBC that more than 1,100 communal kitchens in Sudan, around 80% of the total, had shut. The BBC estimated that, consequently, nearly two million Sudanese struggling to survive were affected. Reuters reported in March that the RSF has placed new constraints on aid deliveries to territories where it is seeking to cement its control.

Emigration flood continues

The harsh conditions have forced more than four million Sudanese out of the country, and many are reluctant to return. Over a thousand Sudanese refugees have reached or attempted to reach Europe in early 2025 alone, the United Nations' refugee agency said in April.

Abdurahman, a 27-year-old Sudanese English teacher displaced in Cairo since the war started, tells *African Business* that it is impossible for many to return.

"Some people return to Sudan and soon after they come back to Egypt again," says Abdurahman. "Here life is a bit cheaper. You can work and pay for your rent and your food, whereas over there in Sudan, you cannot do it nowadays. A lot of people have ended up living in the street."

Despite recently being deported from Egypt because of what he said was a small delay in the renewal of his UN refugee card, he decided to return to Cairo by smuggling routes.

"The situation is really bad, it has changed drastically," Abdurahman says. "It is too much money for me to rent a house over there and even to start my life from the beginning, I could not do it."

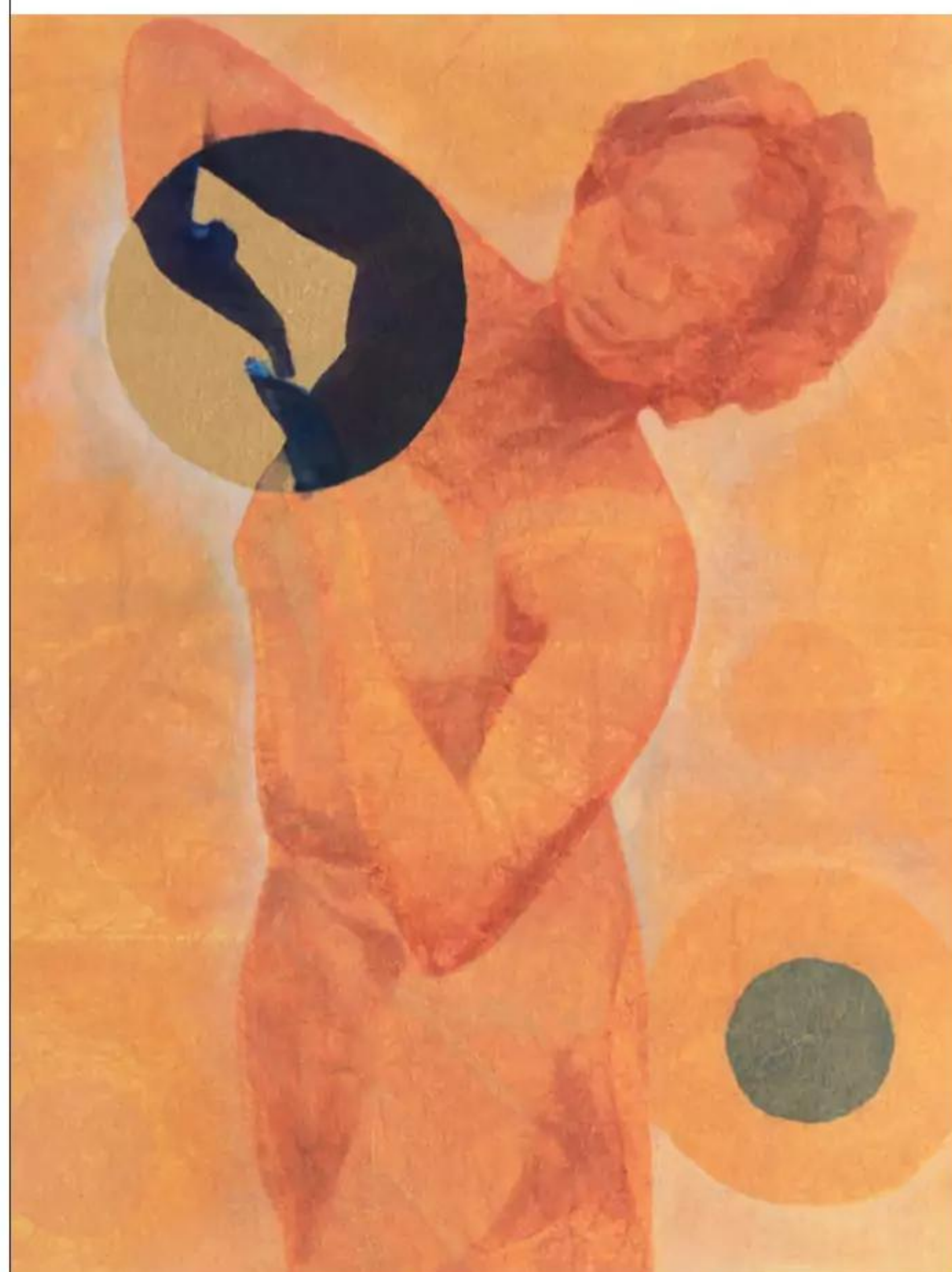
Those who have chosen to stay face multiple challenges, including runaway inflation and restrictions on work.

Abdallah, 40, a former Khartoum-based lawyer before the war started, is now based in Port Sudan, living off savings as he searches for a new occupation.

"It is rare to find someone working in their field, especially in war zones... Some live off remittances from abroad, while others adapt to the market with very simple jobs, such as carrying goods, selling portable drinking water, selling food, or engaging in small-scale trade," he says. ■

1-54 Contemporary African Art Fair returns to New York this May, celebrating a decade in the city with a bold new venue and a fresh curatorial focus on the Caribbean. With 30 exhibitors and a growing international footprint, the fair continues to position African and diasporic art at the heart of the global market.

1-54 New York: Caribbean diaspora drives bold new markets



From 8 to 11 May 2025, 1-54 Contemporary African Art Fair will return to New York for its eleventh edition, celebrating ten years of presence in the city. This year's fair will be held for the first time at The Halo, 28 Liberty Street, in the heart of Manhattan's financial district. The new venue will provide a fresh and expansive backdrop for a fair that has become a cornerstone of New York's cultural calendar each spring.

With around 30 exhibitors from Africa, Europe, the United States and the Caribbean, the fair will showcase work by over 70 artists working across a range of

Above from left to right: Pamela Enyonu, *Ideke Okipi*, 2024, paper, acrylic, gold leaf on canvas, 120 x 100 cm, courtesy of AKKA Project; Anina Major, *Velvet Blush*, 2024, glazed stoneware, seaglass and flocking, 27.94 x 20.32 cm, courtesy of TERN Gallery; and Matheus Marques Abu, *The Dialectics of the Jump*, 2025, acrylic on canvas, 195 x 138 cm, courtesy of the artist and Galeria Karla Osorio.

Opposite: Rachel Malaika, *Rituel Mandona*, 2022, baryta inkjet paper, 120 x 80 cm, courtesy of KUB_ART GALLERY.

media, from painting and photography to sculpture, installation and digital forms. The 2025 edition is set to reaffirm 1-54's distinct role in platforming contemporary African and diasporic art within an international context, attracting collectors, curators, museum professionals and a wide public audience.

This edition will also build on a curatorial direction introduced in 2023 with 1-54 Presents, a series of pop-up exhibitions launched by the fair. The inaugural show, *Sparkling Islands, Another Postcard of the Caribbean*, featured thirteen artists from across the region and its diaspora, challenging stereotypical portrayals of



1-54 Contemporary African Art Fair New York 2025

the Caribbean and offering a complex and diverse view of its contemporary art scene. Curated by the late Caryl Ivrisse Crochemar, the exhibition marked a pivotal step in expanding the fair's focus and deepening its engagement with Caribbean perspectives. The 2025 Caribbean Spotlight will be developed in continuity with that initiative, paying tribute to Ivrisse-Crochemar's vision while advancing the conversation it began.

As 1-54 celebrates a decade in New York, this upcoming edition will reaffirm the fair's position not only as a commercial platform but as a site of exchange, research and cultural connection. The inclusion of Caribbean perspectives this year will offer a timely and important expansion of the fair's mission, setting the stage for deeper, more layered conversations around identity, migration, resistance and representation within the global art world.

Fair overview

The 2025 edition of 1-54 New York will feature around 30 exhibitors and over 70 artists from 17 countries across five continents. Presented for the first time at Halo, 28 Liberty Street, the fair will take place in a striking 30,000 square foot venue in Manhattan's financial district, offering an expansive setting for its broad and international curatorial vision.

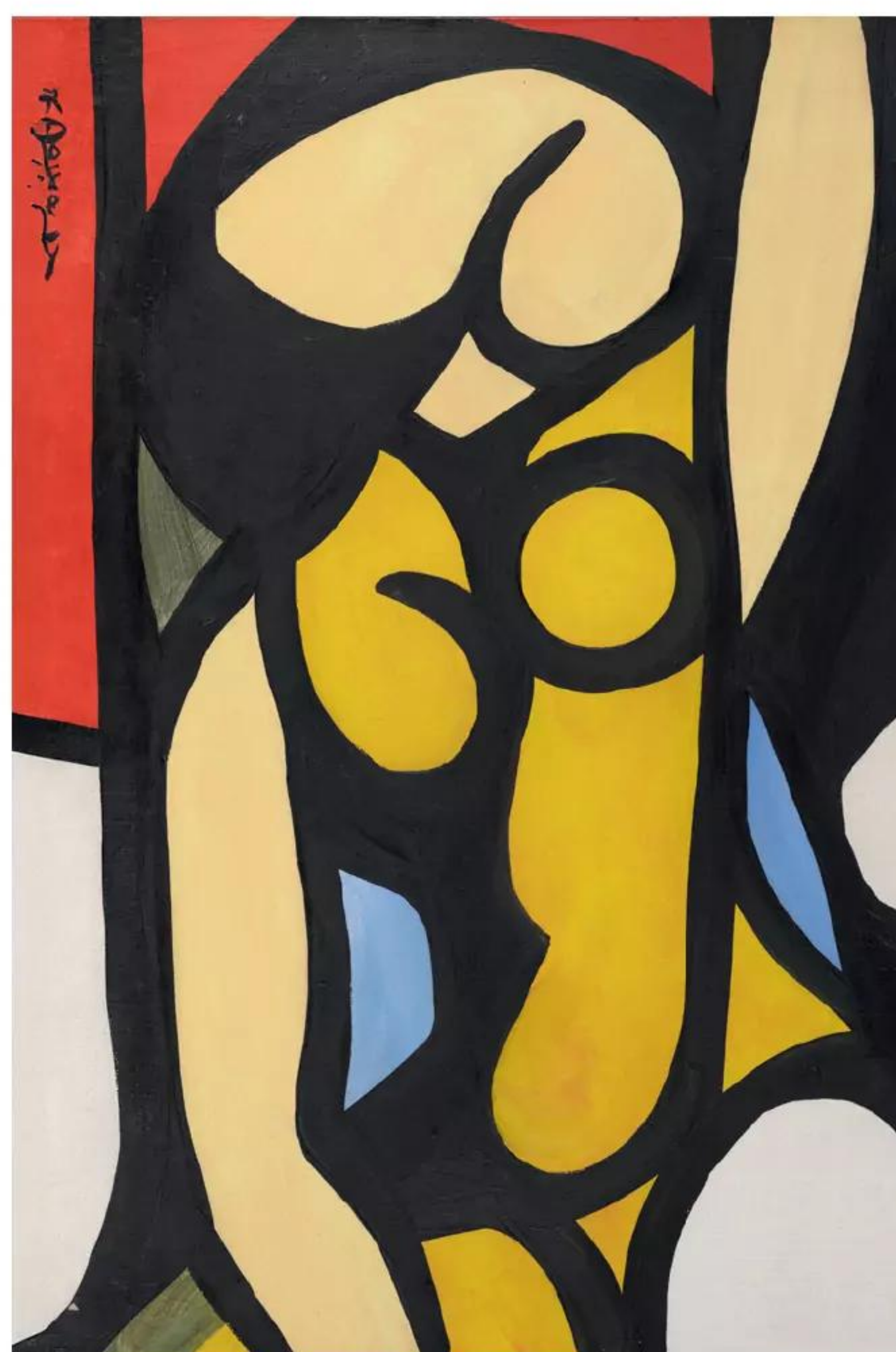
Eighteen galleries will be exhibiting in New York for the first time, including notable new participants such as TERN Gallery from the Bahamas and Kub'Art Gallery from the Democratic Republic of Congo, both marking important firsts in the fair's history. The exhibitor list will reflect a wide international reach, with galleries based in cities including Tokyo, Lagos, Johannesburg, Geneva, Paris and across the United States. Participants will include AKKA Project from Venice, Dubai and Lugano, O'DA Art from Lagos, Fridman Gallery from New York, Galerie Carole Kvasnevski from Paris and New York, Jonathan Carver Moore from San Francisco and Gallery Article 15 from Washington DC.

The diversity of geography and vision will underscore 1-54's commitment to presenting a compelling cross-section of contemporary African art from both established and emerging spaces.

Several large-scale presentations and artist-led projects will add further depth to the 2025 edition. Gallery 1957 will present a powerful work by Yaw Owusu, composed entirely of US pennies, reimagining the American flag and prompting reflection on liberty, economy and national identity. Almine Rech will showcase *FIGURES OF MIRACLE*, a raffia-based installation by Joël Andrianomearisoa that explores memory, labour and tradition through material gesture and cultural symbolism.

Art Comes First will contribute *Textile Language*, a project tracing the legacy of African cotton and weaving traditions as sites of identity and resistance. FORGOTTEN LANDS will create the Afro-Caribbean Resource Library, a curated literary installation designed to encourage deeper engagement with Caribbean thought, history and creativity.

The fair will also honour the long-standing legacy of David Krut Projects, which has introduced South African artists to New York audiences for over 25 years. Kalashnikovv Gallery will pay tribute with a presentation of artists who have worked in the same Johannesburg workshop as



William Kentridge, showcasing both established and emerging voices from the region.

Caribbean Spotlight

The 2025 edition of 1-54 New York will mark a meaningful continuation of the fair's engagement with the Caribbean, following the launch of *Sparkling Islands, Another Postcard of the Caribbean* in 2023. Presented as part of the 1-54 Presents programme, the 2023 exhibition featured thirteen artists from across the region and its diaspora and challenged stereotypical representations of the Caribbean by foregrounding conceptual depth, political nuance and cultural specificity. Curated by the late Caryl Ivrisse Crochemar, *Sparkling Islands* laid the groundwork for a more sustained dialogue around Caribbean art within the fair's global platform. The 2025 Caribbean Spotlight will be developed in continuity with that vision and will serve as a tribute to his curatorial legacy.

Curated by ATLANTIC ARTHOUSE, a collective based in the Caribbean Mid-Atlantic, the 2025 Caribbean Spotlight will bring together eight contemporary artists whose work explores themes of migration, memory and cultural hybridity. The presentation will reflect the collective's hybrid approach, which combines exhibitions, e-commerce and community programming to increase visibility for underrepresented artists working across Caribbean, Afro-descendant, Indigenous and Latinx communities.

Galerie Loeve&Co will also contribute to this expanded narrative with a group presentation that includes a range of modern artists, among them Haitian painter Roland Dorcély. A pioneering figure in Caribbean modernism, Dorcély's inclusion adds a historical layer to the presentation and opens up a conversation about his influence within broader modernist movements, including connections to African art histories. While the rest of the presentation focuses on French and African artists, the presence of Dorcély situates the work in a wider transatlantic dialogue, reinforcing the interlinked narratives at the heart of this year's fair.

The Caribbean focus will be further enriched by FORGOTTEN LANDS, which will present the Afro-Caribbean Resource Library in the fair's lounge. Featuring a curated collection of publications spanning poetry, fiction, political discourse and art criticism, the project will encourage deeper engagement with the literary and theoretical frameworks that shape Caribbean creative practices today.

Together, the Caribbean Spotlight, FORGOTTEN LANDS' contribution, and Loeve&Co's presentation will build on the foundation laid by *Sparkling Islands* and carry forward a more expansive and inclusive vision for 1-54. By foregrounding both

contemporary and historical Caribbean voices and highlighting their intersections with African art histories, the fair will open up important new narratives and reaffirm its commitment to global artistic dialogue.

Conclusion

The 2025 edition of 1-54 New York is set to be a strong and expansive moment in the fair's ten-year journey in the city. Taking place at Halo, 28 Liberty Street, this year's edition will make full use of its new setting in the financial district, offering a spacious and adaptable venue for gallery presentations, special projects

and curated interventions. With around 30 exhibitors from 17 countries across five continents, including 18 showing in New York for the first time, the fair will reinforce its position as a key platform for galleries looking to reach new audiences and engage with collectors, curators and institutions in meaningful ways.

It will continue to serve as a space for discovery and dialogue across the contemporary African and diasporic art landscape.

New additions to the programme, including the launch of the Caribbean Spotlight and the Afro-Caribbean Resource Library by FORGOTTEN LANDS, will bring

additional context and curatorial depth. The presence of modern voices such as Roland Dorcély alongside younger contemporary artists will point to a growing interest in more layered, intergenerational narratives.

As 1-54 prepares to open its eleventh New York edition and celebrate a decade in the city, the fair remains focused on expanding its scope and deepening its mission. Each edition builds on what came before, reaffirming a commitment to championing contemporary African art in all its forms and creating meaningful connections across continents, generations and perspectives. ■

Opposite top : Billy Gérard Frank, *Who is Queen Now*, 2022, mixed media, fabric, acrylic on paper, 36 x 24 in, courtesy of the artist and Atlantic Art House.

Opposite bottom: Roland Dorcély, *Untitled*, circa 1958, oil on painting, 65 x 46 cm, courtesy of Loeve&Co.

Below: FORGOTTEN LANDS exhibition, New York, photo by Adam Kenner.

■ By foregrounding Caribbean voices, the fair challenges stereotypes and opens new dialogues in global contemporary art



Refreshment

As the ski season wound down in April, a video surfaced on Instagram showing a group of holidaymakers sipping Pedro's premium ògógóró on the snowy slopes of the French Alps. Wrapped in ski jackets and speaking in a mix of Lagosian, London and American accents, they passed around the subtly smoky Nigerian spirit, laughing and toasting. The moment was unscripted, raw, and oddly poignant: a drink that was once the equivalent of moonshine turned into a premium brand, and now drunk in one of Europe's most exclusive playgrounds.

Lola Pedro, the British-Nigerian co-founder of Pedro's, didn't know who the skiers were. But she wasn't surprised. "Nigerians are everywhere," she said. "And Pedro's always finds its way into a suitcase." Pedro's is part of a new generation of African-owned spirits reshaping perceptions of what the con-

African-brewed spirits such as premium ògógóró are winning new drinkers at home and abroad, writes
Will McBain.

tinent can produce and export. Across Nigeria, Ghana, Zimbabwe and South Africa, local entrepreneurs are reclaiming indigenous ingredients and traditions long dismissed as informal, illicit, or inferior. Their brands fuse authenticity with innovation, aiming to capture their slice of the global premium market while staying rooted in cultural memory.

Cult appeal

In Lagos, Pedro's has become a cult favourite among a certain crowd – discerning drinkers, diaspora returnees, and travellers looking for something more immersive than imported cognac. But the path from palm to polished bottle hasn't been easy.

Pedro's is distilled from palm sap, traditionally fermented and fired in bush stills. Pedro and her business partner Chibueze Akukwe wanted to preserve that heritage while refining the product so that it could sit on shelves in Selfridges. "We didn't want to just repackage ògógóró. We wanted to elevate it," Akukwe says. "But there was no roadmap. The Nigerian authorities weren't sure how to regulate us. Exporting spirits made entirely in Nigeria? That's still basically unheard of."

Despite these barriers, Pedro's has made its way to Ghana, the UK, Kenya and as far away as Australia.

Spirited African distillers aim for the global market



In the UK, a bottle sells for £60 (\$80). In Lagos, it's less than half that. Social media has helped, but the team deliberately scaled back online activity last year. "We were tantalising people we couldn't supply," Pedro says. "So now we're focusing on building the foundations, scaling our production, setting up a bigger distillery, and launching an aged line that will take us to another level."

For generations, the palm tree has been at the centre of life in West Africa. Its wood builds homes, its leaves roof them, its fruit flavours meals and powers fires. But it's the sap – slowly tapped from the tree and drunk fresh as palm wine – that carries the most cultural weight. Distilled, it becomes ògògóró in Nigeria or akpeteshie in Ghana: a potent, clear spirit traditionally made in villages and shared at weddings, funerals, and festivals.

During the colonial era, British authorities outlawed these spirits, citing vague concerns over purity and public health. In practice, the bans were seen by many as a way to undercut local industry and protect imports of Scotch and London dry gin. Production went underground. Bottles were unlabelled, recipes passed down orally, and the drinks became shorthand for back-alley swigs and rough edges.

Even now, ògògóró is often misunderstood – grouped with moonshine or dismissed as unsafe. But in truth, says Pedro, the best batches are artisanal, small-run, naturally fermented from palm sap and double-distilled over firewood in handcrafted stills. No additives. No shortcuts. Its flavour is earthy, dark chocolatey and smoky, with a kick that lingers.

Still tastes like home

Brands like Pedro's are trying to reclaim that legacy – not by hiding the drink's roots, but by celebrating them. "We asked ourselves," Pedro says, "how do we make an ògògóró that holds its own against the world's best spirits – but still tastes like home?"

The timing may be fortuitous. The global spirits industry is predicted to grow from \$152.3bn in 2024 to \$161.23bn in 2025, at a compound annual growth rate of 5.9%, says the Business Research Company.

Ultra-premium bottles now account for nearly 5% of total market value, according to drink data firm IWSR. In South Africa alone, local spirits exports to markets like Zambia, Mozambique and Brazil grew by over 25% last year, IWSR says. And while African spirits still represent a fraction of global volumes, they're capturing attention. In Africa, premium spirits make up just 4% of volumes but contribute nearly 20% of value says IWSR in its 2024 *Beverage Alcohol in Africa* report.

Christopher John Day, an analyst at Euromonitor, says the market for African spirits is stabilising after two years of intense growth driven in part by rising disposable income and a desire among affluent Africans to display their status. "There's a strong sense of identity and storytelling embedded in these spirits," he says. "International brands can't replicate that. But competing with [global brands] on price, scale, or distribution is still a big challenge."

In South Africa, Spearhead Spirits has won praise for Bayab Gin and Vusa Vodka, which use indigenous botanicals and source ingredients from local farmers. Zimbabwean sommelier Tinashe Nyamudoka

Opposite: Chibueze Akukwe, co-founder of Pedro's distillery, fixing a tool during a production in Lagos, Nigeria.

has gained global recognition for Kumusha Wines. And in Ghana, Amma Mensah has turned Reign Rum into a luxury product aged in cashew brandy barrels, wrapped in Ashanti symbolism. South Africa's Three Ships Whisky continues to rack up global awards.

"The tactic we're seeing now is that smaller African brands are identifying niche categories where the big international players haven't consolidated themselves yet," Day adds. "That's where local producers can really carve out space – but it takes time."

Authenticity and backstory

Day says African brands also benefit from shifting global tastes. "Consumers, particularly in markets like the US and UK, are looking for authenticity and backstory – something that feels rooted in place and people," says Day. "That gives African spirits a real edge, if they can get past the export and distribution barriers."

But most of Africa's spirit brands still operate in small batches, not because they want to, but because navigating local logistics, taxation, and regional distribution is maddeningly complex, says Akukwe. The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) offers a potential lifeline, but as Pedro's experience shows, even basic export rules remain opaque.

"The system is designed for us to ship raw materials and have the value added somewhere else," Akukwe says. "But we're trying to do everything from scratch in Nigeria – tap the palm, distil, bottle, and ship. And that's disruptive."

Pedro's is currently working with Nigerian authorities on securing geographical indication status for ògògóró, much like tequila in Mexico or champagne in France. That could give Nigerian spirits international legitimacy and protection.

"We're building a new facility outside Lagos that'll be part distillery, part destination," Pedro explains. "Like going to a vineyard. You'll see the tapping, the bush distillation, the refinement. It's not just a drink – it's culture." Their next big push is this December, when diaspora Nigerians flood home for what's colloquially known as "Detty December". Lagos fills with rooftop parties, imported DJs, and flowing bottles of foreign liquor. "We're not the sparkler crowd," says Pedro. "Pedro's is for sitting down with your friends and reconnecting with your roots. Not doing shots. It's a thinking person's drink." But the sales opportunity of Detty December remains.

Even at home, building that trust hasn't been easy. Many Nigerians, aspirational and image-conscious, have historically preferred foreign labels. But inflation and import bottlenecks have made Pedro's unexpectedly attractive. "We saw a spike in sales when international booze got more expensive," says Akukwe.

The product itself continues to evolve. Each harvest yields a different flavour – a consequence of climate, palm variety, and fermentation. The latest batch tastes like dark chocolate, they say. For the first time, they're printing a special sticker to mark the vintage.

The goal isn't just to compete with foreign brands, but to redefine premium African spirits. "We want people to know ògògóró the way they know tequila or mezcal," Pedro says. "And we want them to drink it with pride." On the ski slopes, they already are. ■

Arts and Culture

Around the world, very few countries have proved immune to the rise of fast fashion. Businesses based on the concept of cheaply made, “buy now, throw away later” clothing and homeware are booming, especially with the rise of online shopping.

Influenced by globalisation and media representation, traditional African textiles and heritage crafts such as handwoven fabrics, detailed beadworks and traditional dyeing methods have been marginalised, often dismissed as outdated or reserved only for ceremonial use.

The African continent, particularly West Africa, of course has a rich history of traditional textiles and heritage crafts stretching back millennia. *Kente* cloth, originating from the Ashanti Kingdom in Ghana, is rich in vibrant colours and patterns and was originally used only for royalty and sacred ceremonies. *Korhogo* cloth from Côte D'Ivoire is made by the Senufo people and features colourful images of animals, people, and geometric designs.

Countercultural revival

But despite the global onslaught the popularity of heritage crafts is once again on the up, and is growing most quickly among a generation who grew up disconnected from traditional cultural craftsmanship in the face of increasing globalisation. What started as a countercultural revival movement is introducing traditional African crafts to a new audience on the global stage.

Amaka Osakwe is a Nigerian designer who founded her Lagos-based fashion label in 2010. A signature look for her iconic brand is the use of *adire*, a traditional Yoruba indigo-dyed textile the usage of which revolves around modern-day Ogun and Osun states in western Nigeria.

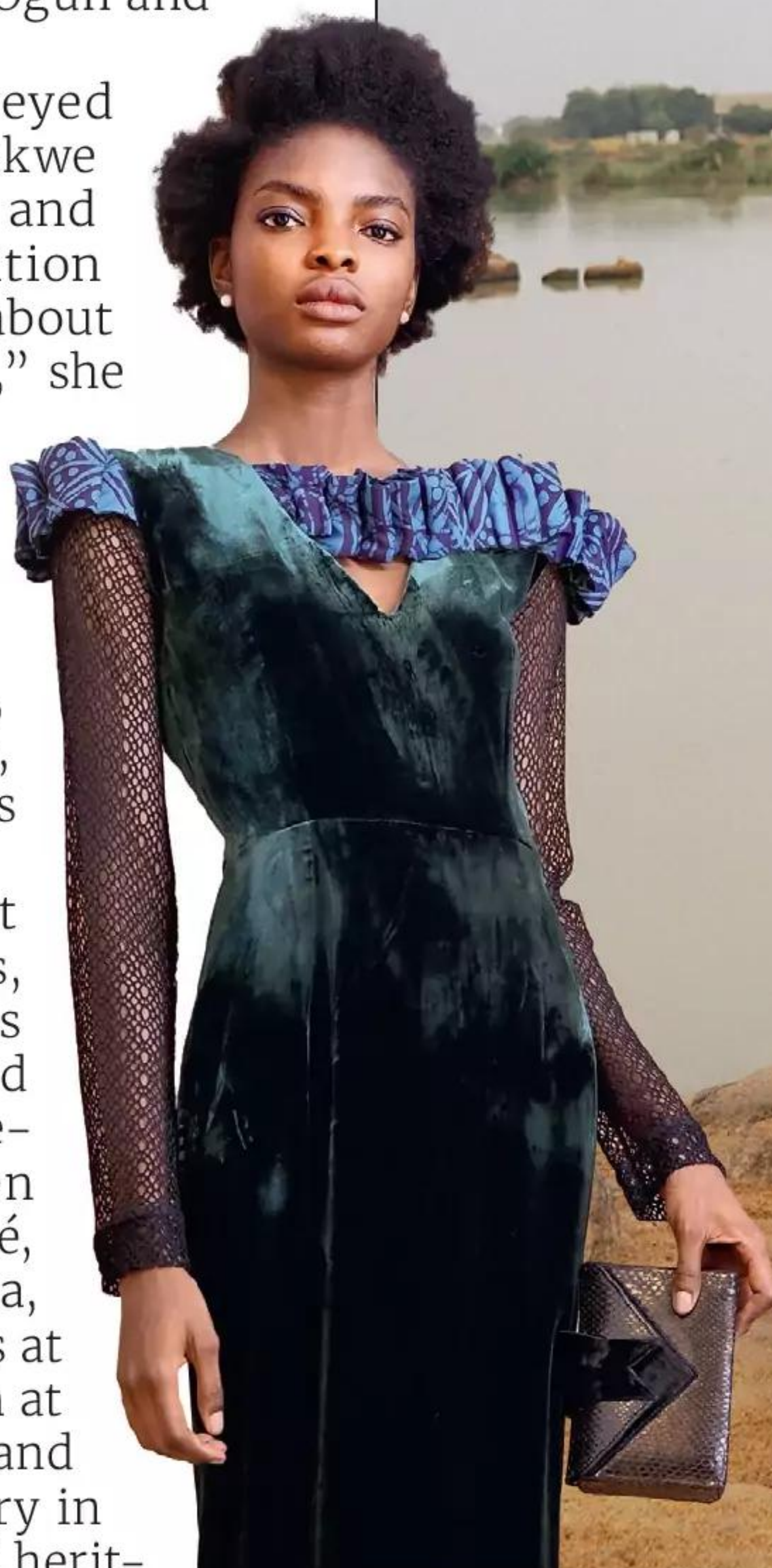
These prints traditionally conveyed messages and observations, and Osakwe is re-purposing traditional motifs and inventing her own, blending tradition with modernity. “When we go on about ‘hand-painted, hand-dyed,’ it’s real,” she explained to the *New Yorker*.

In her early collections Osakwe made fringes out of *aso oke*, a Yoruba hand-woven cloth. In a 2013 collection she created clothes with traditionally Western silhouettes, including a blouse and pencil skirt, made with traditional Nigerian fabrics and prints.

The dyeing process, all carried out by hand, can take months and months, yet she ensures that the techniques used in garment creation today – and the hard work involved – reaps its rewards. Osakwe’s creations have been worn by celebrities including Beyoncé, Lupita Nyong’o, and Michelle Obama, and she has showcased her collections at New York Fashion Week, the museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology and the Brighton Museum and Art Gallery in England, celebrating African cultural herit-

Cheap, mass-produced and derivative fashion dominates retail, but African designers are fighting back with quality, innovation and tradition, writes Emily Allen.

The African designers taking on ‘fast fashion’



Above: Nybe Ponzio captured the energy of Mali's national team jerseys.

Left: Amaka Osakwe uses traditional African elements with western silhouettes design.

Opposite: South African designer Laduma Ngxokolo with his Knitwear collection and on the catwalk.

age, and in doing so introducing the *adire* designs to the global fashion stage.

Beads' roots

As critical to the story of pan-African history as textiles is beadwork. Regions and tribes across the continent have unique styles, patterns, and meanings associated with beadwork, and bead designs and patterns serve different functions, from indicating social status to fulfilling ceremonial roles.

Beadwork is not only a form of artistic expression but represents defining life moments, such as birth, marriage, and death. Its forms and designs differ across the continent: the Zulu people of South Africa are renowned for beadwork featuring bright, bold geometric patterns; in Western Africa glass chevron beads, originally from Venice, are most common, as they were frequently used in exchanges with Dutch traders from the 1500s.

South African designer Laduma Ngxokolo incorporates traditional tribal beadwork practices into his creations. Many of these are fusions of traditional beadwork patterns with modern knitwear. In 2011, inspired by Xhosa cultural motifs, he founded the brand MaXhosa Africa with the aim of exploring bold and bright knitwear concepts that celebrated traditional Xhosa beadwork designs while also using traditional South African materials such as mohair and wool.

Speaking to the *Sable Network*, Ngxokolo explained how, in founding his brand, he “set out a vision to showcase the astonishing beauty of the Xhosa people” and to “translate it in a modern way that appeals to youth [that is] influenced by international trends”.

And it didn't take long for his vision to be realised. Ngxokolo has showcased his work in Berlin, London and New York. In March this year he unveiled the Umbulelo collection at Paris Fashion Week. Taken from the isiXhosa word for gratitude, Ngxokolo describes this collection as “a love letter to [his] ancestors” in an interview with *News 24*. These latest designs blend Xhosa-inspired vibrant and bold prints with Western-style cuts and silhouettes.

It may seem ironic that one of the harbingers of modernity – social media – has given rise to a resurgence of interest in traditional African heritage crafts and the skills, stories, and significance behind these artisanal practices. French-Malian photographer Nybe Ponzio shares his photos on Instagram as @visualsbyponzio – shots of everyday life in Mali, including children wearing traditional Malian dress, and a group of women braiding one another's hair. His images, displaying traditional African heritage in glorious technicolour, are eagerly “liked” by a global audience who, it seems, cannot get enough of these snapshots of traditional African culture meeting modernity.

Senegalese artist Samba JJ posts on Instagram un-

der the handle @lejardinjolof; his page, which boasts an impressive 19,000 global followers, is dedicated to images of traditional African crafts including jewellery and tribal masks. In an interview with *Muse Origins* he said he wanted to “bring traditional masks to life for a modern audience... by translating their meaning into modern times”.

Like many heritage concepts, traditional African artistry must adapt to survive, and Samba isn't the only artist adapting centuries-old tradition and significance for a global audience.

The meaning of beadwork has also evolved over the years, and these beautiful decorations are no longer used solely to adorn jewellery, shoes or clothing.

Nigerian artist Lanre Buraimoh has led the way in a beadwork renaissance by creating intricately detailed paintings that depict Yoruba cultural symbols using thousands of bold and beautiful glass beads.

Buraimoh describes this unique visual art form as “bead painting” and in an interview with *Vanguard* described his chosen method as “a vehicle for translating [his] inner vision to realism”.

Bold and beautiful, his works depict traditional Yoruba themes and concepts, including traditional beliefs, love, animals, and the family unit. His 2019 work *The Kiss* depicts two entwined bodies embracing under the moon, and his 2011 work *Huts* depicts colourful houses clustered together under a blue sky. Buraimoh's works have

been exhibited around the world, including Nigeria, Denmark, the UK and US.

He has received multiple international accolades from institutions including the American Art Awards and Citywide African American Exhibit.

Factory replicas

But challenges remain. With the rise of mass tourism to Africa, cheap, factory-made replicas risk flooding the market, affecting the income of artists and diluting the cultural significance of these crafts passed down through generations. Community groups, such as Kenyan women's group SATUBO, help train up the next generation of artisans and provide skills and training to provide rural women with a viable source of income, and to preserve these ancient skill sets. In a world dominated by speed and convenience, the resurgence of traditional African artistry stands as a powerful act of cultural resilience and creative renaissance.

These crafts – steeped in symbolism, identity, and history – are not just historical practices, but living, evolving art forms that continue to speak to a new generation. In the capable hands of designers like Amaka Osakwe and Laduma Ngxokolo, and the vision of artists such as Lanre Buraimoh and Samba JJ, Africa's artistic heritage is being redefined, celebrated, and projected onto the global stage. ■



These crafts – steeped in symbolism, identity, and history – are not just historical practices, but living, evolving art forms



Review

Juche, North Korea's nationalist ideology, resonated with African liberation movements and left a trail of blood and statues. Stephen Williams reviews a new account of a strange relationship.

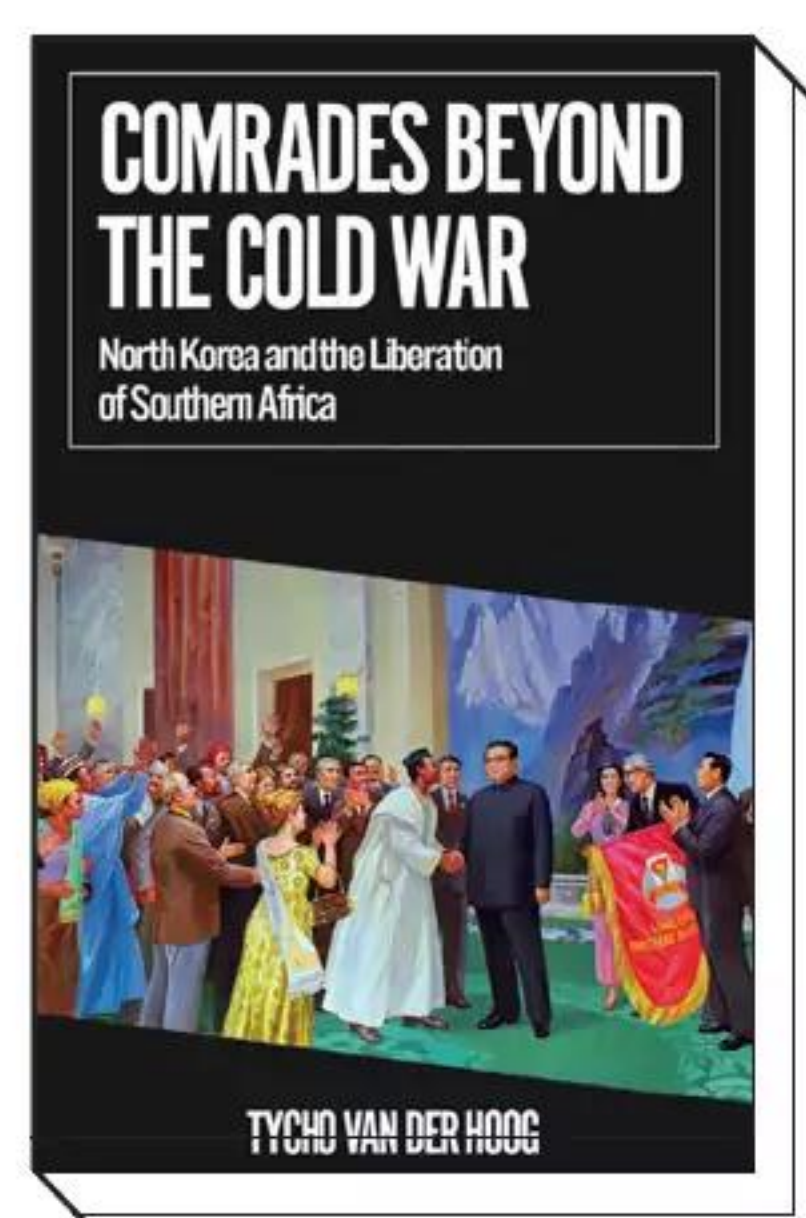
Illuminating North Korea's shadow influence in Africa

Tycho van der Hoog's tightly researched book sheds light on a generally overlooked relationship – that between Africa and the repressive and impoverished “hermit kingdom” of North Korea. The relationship has its genesis in ties dating back to the Cold War era, when liberation forces throughout Southern Africa, fighting for self-determination against colonialism and white supremacy, sought international military and diplomatic support.

North Korea – inspired by its own history of Japanese colonialism, its militant communism and its struggle against the US and US-backed South Korea – was one nation that answered the call.

The book has three parts: Blood; Bullets; and Bronze. The first part, “Blood”, is an explanation of how and why Southern Africa's liberation movements looked for both moral and material assistance during and after the struggle.

North Korea's nationalist ideology is named *Juche*, which is generally translated as “self-reliance”. *Juche* calls for the country's development of political and military independence and economic ingenuity – an ideology which, van der Hoog explains, resonated with African liberation movements.



COMRADES BEYOND THE COLD WAR: NORTH KOREA AND THE LIBERATION OF SOUTHERN AFRICA

By Tycho van der Hoog
£25 Hurst
ISBN: 978-1-80526-278-7

Opinion is divided on whether *Juche* retains any trace of its Marxist-Leninist ideological roots; some argue that it has evolved into a mere propaganda tool upholding the autocratic rule of the Kim dynasty in North Korea.

Nevertheless, its influence was felt in Africa. North Korea sponsored 30 *Juche* study centres during the Cold War years. Liberation activists travelled across the continent to learn about this Korean ideology and how it might be applied to their struggles in their own countries.

As van der Hoog points out: “Political independence and formal diplomatic ties with North Korea were necessary requirements for the establishment and funding of *Juche* Study Centres – up until the end of the Cold War, when North Korea

no longer had the money to fund these operations. “This is why, for example, Namibia and South Africa never hosted *Juche* Study Centres. When these countries were liberated in 1990 and 1994, it was, in a sense, too late.”

Aid for Africa

Juche Study Centres were not the only weapons in North Korea's propaganda arsenal. Pyongyang was also prepared to extend aid to its African friends following liberation.

In Lesotho North Korea helped build a national stadium, ran vegetable farms and experimented with maize production. In the Seychelles the country donated cement for housing projects and tractors for agricultural development.

The aid was often targeted at countries with influence over the continent's liberation movements.

Tanzania, which hosted the Organization of African Unity's Liberation Committee, and Ghana, home to Kwame Nkrumah's pro-liberation Bureau of African Affairs, both received agricultural assistance. After liberation, the former “front-line states” of Angola, Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Zambia all received assistance.

And yet North Korea's aid efforts all too often ended in failure, with limited programmes offering little impact. In Ghana, says van der Hoog, the “practical results were dismal,” despite the lofty hopes of the Ghanaian and North Korean governments.

Barrel of the gun

While aid – however limited in impact – played a role in cementing ties, central to the relationship was military training and hardware. While military support was originally directed towards the liberation struggle against colonialism, it continued to favour African allies even after liberation.

Bullets, the second theme of this book, looks at the most shameful of episodes, which occurred after Zimbabwe gained its independence.

At the time of liberation Zimbabwe was divided between two major fighting forces – the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) and the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU). ZANU, led by Robert Mugabe, recruited mainly from the majority Shona people, whereas ZAPU drew its greatest support in Matabeleland, in the south west of the country.

Mugabe, who assumed the prime ministership in 1980, signed an agreement with then North Korean leader Kim Il Sung in October of that year to have the North Korean military train a brigade for the Zimbabwean army.

Rivalries between ZANU and ZAPU

intensified following independence and erupted in January 1983, when a violent crackdown by the notorious North Korean-trained Fifth Brigade initiated a purge of ZAPU “dissidents”.

In Matabeleland Ndebele men of fighting age were considered potential “dissidents” and therefore, guilty of subversive activities. Most of those detained who were not summarily executed were marched to re-education camps.

The result was one of the bloodiest and most shameful episodes in North Korea’s African involvement. The consensus of the International Association of Genocide Scholars (IAGS) is that more than 20,000 people were killed in operations including one named *Gukurahundi* – roughly “cleansing rain” in the Shona language – exceeding the death toll in Matabeleland during the liberation struggle.

Self-glorification

Having detailed the violent depths of the relationship, van der Hoog turns to the way in which North Korean visual propaganda – most notably statues – has influenced African iconography. The hermit

kingdom helped to design and influence statues, memorials and buildings across Africa, lionising heroic African leaders and their peoples in styles familiar from the streets of Pyongyang.

van der Hoog comments: “In recent years, several striking monuments have been erected across the African continent that assert a confident vision of African identity. In 2010, Senegal unveiled the African Renaissance Monument which is, at 50m high, the largest statue on the continent.”

Central to these projects is a North Korean studio, the Mansudae Overseas Project (MOP). North Korean statues have

Juche calls for the country’s development of political and military independence and economic ingenuity – an ideology which, van der Hoog explains, resonated with African liberation movements

appeared in Maputo, Mozambique (Samora Machel); in Gaborone, Botswana (the Three Dikgosi Monument); and in Luanda, Angola (Agostinho Neto).

Mausoleums and cemeteries for fallen liberation heroes are also a focus of North Korean design in Africa.

Exploitation and criminality

Given that aggressive militarism and propaganda have always gone hand in hand in the hermit kingdom, it is little surprise that the influence of North Korea in Africa has often been overwhelmingly negative. Whenever North Korea’s failed command economy has tottered, the state has turned to illicit revenue generation such as counterfeiting, drug dealing, and trading in African ivory and rhino horn and other criminal enterprises.

These criminal enterprises, the brutality of the Kim regime, and the country’s quest for nuclear weaponry have made North Korea a pariah state. As a result, the liberation era and its immediate aftermath now looks like the high-water mark of a relationship of limited modern value to Africa. ■



The African Renaissance Monument in Senegal, built by North Korea in 2010.

South Africa's own history of fighting colonialism, and its advocacy for a peaceful world order and respect for the UN charter, make Ukraine a cause worth supporting in its own right, writes David Thomas.

South Africa's Ukraine stance must go beyond Trump contempt



Left: President Volodymyr Zelensky of Ukraine (L) is greeted by South Africa's President Cyril Ramaphosa during an official visit to South Africa.

In late April Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky was welcomed to Pretoria's Union Buildings by South African President Cyril Ramaphosa for a historic visit, the first by a Ukrainian head of state in 33 years since the post-apartheid establishment of diplomatic relations. The visit comes at a pivotal time in the history of Ukraine. After over three years of grinding war, the country's long-time ally, the US, now under President Donald Trump, is attempting to force Zelensky into signing a lop-sided "peace" deal with Russia that would permanently give away occupied regions. Throughout the haphazard talks, featuring the uniquely incompetent diplomacy of Trump's Moscow envoy Steve Witkoff, Trump has repeatedly blamed Zelensky for blocking peace.

As if to underline the impunity that Putin feels Trump grants him, Russia launched its largest attack on Kiev since July while Zelensky was in South Africa, killing at least twelve and forcing his return home.

Perplexing Pretoria

South Africa's own policy towards Ukraine during the war has been baffling. During Joe Biden's presidency, the country was more or less seen as a closet ally of Russia. Pretoria outraged Washington DC when it held joint naval exercises with China and Russia. Relations hit a low when Reuben Brigety, then US ambassador to South Africa, accused South Africa of helping to illegally ship arms to Russia – an allegation that South Africa fiercely denied.

Ramaphosa has enjoyed warm relations with Vladimir Putin throughout the war, and at times appeared to back Putin's *casus belli* – that the war is a response to NATO expansionism in eastern Europe. Publicly, South Africa has tried to have it both ways, pointing to its history of non-alignment and efforts to encourage African-brokered dialogue. But the direction of travel seemed clear.

Yet in recent months Ramaphosa's tone has changed. The invitation to Zelensky, who is desperate to mobilise support from the global south to counter the perception that Ukraine is a Euro-Atlantic obsession, was a surprise. And the tone during his visit was supportive: South Africa, Ramaphosa said "is deeply concerned about the continuing conflict in Ukraine, the loss of civilian lives, damage to critical infrastructure and deteriorating humanitarian situation," and supports a "just" and "sustainable" peace.

Ramaphosa's nostalgia for the Soviet Union's backing of the ANC, the benefits of which were previously monopolised by Russia, were extended to Ukraine.

"We acknowledge with great appreciation the support we received from Ukraine during our liberation struggle. We recall that a number of exiled South Africans received training and education in Ukraine," Ramaphosa tweeted.

Irritating Uncle Sam

What is behind this change of approach? It would be comforting to believe that Ramaphosa has woken up to the brutality of the war and Putin's murderous contempt for international law. But Ramaphosa spoke to Putin shortly before Zelensky's visit, and gave the usual noises about "working together towards a peaceful resolution of the Russia-Ukraine conflict".

Reaching out to Zelensky may simply be a stick in the eye of the USA. In recent months, Trump has dragged relations with South Africa through the gutter – expelling ambassador Ebrahim Rasool, gifting asylum to Afrikaners that he baselessly insists are persecuted, and encouraging secretary of state Marco Rubio to boycott a G20 foreign ministers' meeting in Johannesburg during South Africa's rotating presidency of the bloc.

There is no love lost between the presidents, even if they have laid tentative plans for a meeting. Friendly with Russia during Biden's presidency, a cynic might say that Ramaphosa is cosyng up to Zelensky just as the new US administration has soured on him.

But South African policy towards Ukraine should be dictated by more than animus to the current US president, whether Republican or Democrat. The country's own history of fighting colonialism and oppression, and its advocacy for a peaceful world order and respect for the UN charter, make Ukraine a cause worth supporting in its own right. ■

SPECIAL REPORT

Japan – Africa

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Since its inception, the Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD) has fostered sustainable development and cooperation between Japan and African nations, evolving to emphasise partnership beyond the conventional donor–recipient model. As TICAD9 approaches in August in Yokohama, the two Japan–Africa Supplements in May and August will explore the evolving economic and trade connections and outline future priorities.

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